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A Measure of the Biblical Understanding of the Early Christian Martyrs

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A Measure of the Biblical Understanding of the Early Christian Martyrs

By Raymond Cox

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Abstract

In Chapter One, I introduce many of the early Christian martyrs and the situations in which they lived and died. I also show the reasons for the existence of the martyrdoms and the mutual attitudes of the Christians and the Pagans. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate that the majority of the martyrs, or those writing about them, did not properly understand and use passages from the Bible. In Chapter Three, I argue that the early martyrs and those writing about them, in contrast to their use and understanding of biblical passages, understood the character of the Devil as he existed in the biblical tradition.

About the Thesis

My initial reasons for writing this Thesis came from a question that my cousin asked me concerning suicide. After researching suicide for a time I found myself reading related early Christian martyr acts more and more often. I began to question their use of the biblical text. I switched my study from what it had been, classical attitudes toward suicide, and instead I chose to examine the early Christian treatment of the text of the Bible.

I started my research by reading through as many of the early martyr acts as I was able and considering the environment within which the Christians were being martyred. I found that my suspicions regarding their use of the Bible were well founded in many respects, though they showed a better understanding than I did in other respects.

Through my research into the early Christian martyr Acts I learned how important it is to have a proper understanding of the historical and literary context for texts like the Bible. Misuse of the text of the Bible led to worse conditions for the early Christians and, though this is only briefly touched in this Thesis, bloody schisms and scathing propaganda. I also found that when the martyrs used the biblical text in its proper historical and literary context their situations were generally improved, or they acted with greater courage and forethought, and their opponents, the pagans, came in turn to understand the Christian stance where previously the pagans had been very hostile and ignorant. It was this ignorance of the pagans and the misuse of the biblical text by the Christians that was largely responsible for the rise in the persecution of the early Christians, though the Christians would claim the majority of the responsibility belonged to their great spiritual antagonist, Satan, as he waged war through the pagans on God's love.

INTRODUCTION



Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto. Altarpiece of San Giorgio Maggiore. *Stoning of Saint Stephen*. C. 1586-1600. Painting. Stephen was the first recorded Christian martyr.

In this thesis, we will be looking at the early Christian martyr Acts, specifically focusing on how they treated the contents and meaning of verses and passages from the Bible, and how

the character of Satan was portrayed in the Acts as compared to how he is portrayed in the books of the Bible.

Chapter One will be a general introduction to the martyr Acts, considering the situations and characters of the martyrdoms commemorated in the Acts. This will set the foundation for the following chapters helping us to understand who the martyrs were and for what it was they were dying.

In Chapter Two, we will consider how the martyrs and the authors of the Acts used biblical passages. Our consideration will be based on a standard of accuracy to determine whether or not the Bible was understood by the martyrs, and the authors who wrote about them in the context and intention of the Bible's verses and in its historical context.

In Chapter Three, we will look at the different characteristics of Satan from the Old and the New Testaments and then examine whether those same characteristics are found in the early Christian martyr Acts and a second set of martyr acts from the Donatists, who will be explained in Chapter One. Based on the findings from this chapter, we will determine if the martyrs and authors had the same level of understanding concerning Satan as they possessed for the Biblical passages.

For the purpose of this thesis, the person of Satan and the terms: 'the Church,' and 'God,' will have specific definitions. 'God' in the Acts, and both Old and New Testaments, will be considered to be the concept of the God of the early Christian Church: the true God, creator of all things who is also the triune God consisting of the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in unity.¹ The term 'the Church,' will refer to the body of persons who avow to believe that

¹ Matthew 3:16-17; Matthew 26:39-43; Acts 2:2-4; Acts 4:24.

Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew tradition, the Old Testament, and spoken of in what would become the New Testament. He took on the flesh of men and was born of a woman, yet is God's son, so that he would be able to die and remove the burden of sin from all who will believe in him.² And finally, Satan (or, the devil), will be considered to be a self-willed entity subordinate to God in the understanding and point of development of the early Church rather than a literary personification for the concept of evil.

² John 3:16; Romans 3:23, 6:23.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONDITIONS OF THE EARLY MARTYRS

In this chapter, we will be taking a brief look at the early Christian martyr acts (Acts) in the second through the fourth centuries. First, I will give some historical background on the Acts that will be examined in this chapter and the following chapters. Nearly all of these Acts were written by and about ‘catholic’ Christian martyrs, and the remainder were written by and about the Donatist Christian martyrs (these latter will be considered in Chapter 3). I will then look at the reasons for the persecutions, edicts from the emperors or otherwise. Then, I will consider the attitude that the local Roman officials had toward the martyrs, and vice versa. Next, I will look at several of the reasons why the early Christians, knowingly or unknowingly, resisted the Roman government, and why they submitted to torture rather than obey the edicts and be set free. This chapter will also consider a few instances of misunderstanding between martyrs and pagans as well as a few of the reasons for why the Martyr Acts were written and a few odd situations of voluntary martyrdom as opposed to the more stereotypical involuntary martyrdom.

The Martyrs

For the sake of ease I am going to briefly introduce each martyr that we will be considering in this Thesis. I will provide their names in bold and a paragraph about the circumstances of their death if such information is available.

Apollonius. There is some confusion about the trial and arrest of the martyr Apollonius. He is known to have been arrested c. 180, but the sources differ on where. Eusebius claims he was a Roman tried before the Senate, but the surviving manuscripts claim he was an Alexandrian

tried in Asia Minor. He was arrested and condemned under a prefect named Perennis by the authority of an uncertain decree attributed to the Senate.³

Conon. He was an old Greek that worked on the irrigation canals on an imperial estate in the town of Carmena during the persecutions under Emperor Decius.⁴ Conon's town was selected, by the city chief Naodorus for severe culling of its Christian inhabitants supposedly for their wicked impiety. Naodorus and an auxiliary soldier named Origen arrested Conon when they found that he was the only Christian who had not fled the city. Conon was taken before the prefect who had him force marched until he died.⁵



Cyprian. <<http://orthodoxwiki.org/>>. Web. 21 March 2015. Painting. St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage.

Crispina. She was a prominent woman in the community in the colony of Thacora in Northern Africa, c. 304. She was arrested and executed by Annius Anullinus. He had her killed because of her refusal to obey the edict of Diocletian and for cursing the Roman gods.⁶

Cyprian. He was bishop in Carthage and was executed by Galerius Maximus on the 14th of September, 258. He had initially avoided arrest under Emperor Decius but was put under house arrest by the proconsul Aspasius Paternus in 257 under the authority of Emperor Valerian's first edict prior to being summoned before Galerius Maximus to be

³ Musurillo, xxiv-xxv.

⁴ Ibid, xxxii-xxxiii.

⁵ Ibid, 187-193

⁶ Ibid, xliv.

killed under the authority of Valerian's second edict.⁷

Dasius. There is also the strange Act of a soldier named Dasius. He was arrested for being a Christian and refusing to celebrate in a Roman festival. The festival may have been the Saturnalia, the text is unsure here. The festival probably took place in Durostorum, Moesia, c. 304. Dasius served in the *legio XI Claudia* under the command of the *legatus* Bassus.⁸

Euplus. He was a deacon in Sicily, c. 304. He interrupted a trial which the judge Calvisianus was in the midst of adjudicating. Upon entering Euplus demanded to be arrested for possessing Christian writings. Calvisianus obligingly had him tortured and then executed when he refused to sacrifice.⁹

Fructuosus. He was the bishop of Tarragona. He and two of his deacons were arrested during Emperor Valerian's reign and brought before the proconsul Aemilian, c. 259. After the trial Fructuosus was led out and burned alive.¹⁰

Irenaeus. He was bishop of Sirmium in Pannonia, c. 304. He was arrested and tried under a man named Probus. He refused to obey the edicts of Emperor Diocletian and was tortured before his children and, after refusing a second time, beheaded.¹¹

Irene, Chione and Agape. These three were in a group which consisted of several young women and teenage girls in Macedonia. They were arrested and, because of Emperor Diocletian's first edict, they were charged with possessing Christian writings. The most

⁷ Ibid, xxx-xxxi.

⁸ Ibid, xl-xli.

⁹ Ibid, xlv.

¹⁰ Ibid, xxxii.

¹¹ Ibid, xliii.



Jacques Callot. C. 1592-1634. Woodcutting. An engraving of Justin Martyr giving a book to a Roman emperor.

prominent among them was the young girl Irene, who had hidden the writings before she was arrested. The two oldest in their group, Agape and Chione, were burned alive but the rest were remanded because of their age, except Irene. The judge, Dulcitius, demanded that she hand over the writings, but when she would not he had her tortured and then killed.¹²

Julius. He is another martyr-soldier that we will be considering. Julius served as a veteran in the Roman army at Durostorum in Moesia,

likely also the *legio XI Claudia*. He was arrested

and brought before a superior officer named Maximus. His arrest was probably due to Diocletian's fourth edict, c. 304. Julius had served in the Roman army for twenty-seven years, reenlisting as a veteran, and fought with distinction in seven campaigns before his trial and execution.¹³

Justin Martyr. He was arrested in Rome c. 165, by the prefect Q. Iunius Rusticus. This was shortly after Justin and a Cynic named Crescens had held a debate. It is possible that Crescens was responsible for Justin's arrest, but there is no definite proof regarding his

¹² Ibid, xlii.

¹³ Ibid, xxxix.

culpability.¹⁴

Marcellus. He was a centurion and was arrested during a banquet celebrating the joint birthday of Emperors Diocletian and Maximian in Tingis on the 21st of July, c. 298. He had caused a public disturbance, resigning his commission. He was tried before the *praefectus legionis*, prefect of the legion at Tingis, Anastasius Fortunatus, and later tried again under Agricolanus, the deputy to the praetorian prefect.¹⁵

Marian and James. Marian was a lector and James a deacon. They, and the author of their Act were arrested in Numidia under the authority of the edicts of Valerian, c. 259, the author was released after only a short time in prison with them because he was not part of the Christian clergy.¹⁶

The Martyrs of Lyons. They were a group of martyrs who were immigrant Christians that lived in and near Lyons, Gaul c. 177, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. Due to a large public demand the immigrant Christians from Asia Minor were banned from public places. Many of these Christians were arrested, then questioned by use of torture, and later killed in the local amphitheater.¹⁷

Montanus and Lucius. They were members of the clergy in Carthage. They were arrested, c. 259, for failing to obey Emperor Valerian's edicts to sacrifice. Shortly thereafter they and their companions were executed. Two bishops, **Agapius** and **Secundinus**, who had just

¹⁴ Ibid, xviii.

¹⁵ Ibid, xxxvii-xxxviii.

¹⁶ Ibid, xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹⁷ Ibid, xx-xxii.



Photo by Mary Harrsch. 2005. Capitoline Museum, Italy. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/44124324682@N01/9941955/in/>set-31666/>>. Web. 20 March 2015. Bust of Emperor Decius.

recently returned to Numidia from exile that same year, were also arrested but by the order of the governor, they had been exiled after Emperor Valerian's first decree.¹⁸

Papylus (also called Pamphilus), **Carpus**, and **Agathonice**. These three pose some unusual problems. There is some confusion over when to place their time of death. However, we do know that they were in Pergamum and were tried before a proconsul named Optimus.¹⁹

The ecclesiastical historian Eusebius placed it during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius c. 161-180, but elements within the Act

suggest that it may have happened during Emperor Decius' rule.²⁰ Because of this dating problem it is not possible to precisely determine what the circumstances of their arrest and condemnation were.

Pionius. He was arrested in Smyrna during the reign of Emperor Decius, c. 249-251. He, and several others, were arrested for refusing to obey the emperor's edicts and sacrifice to the Roman Gods. Pionius was a prominent Christian presbyter, an elder, in Smyrna and he was also a

¹⁸ Ibid, xxxiv-xxxv.

¹⁹ Ibid, 23-29.

²⁰ Ibid, xv.

grammarian.²¹

The Donatists. This is the other group of martyrs that we will be considering as a part of Chapter Three. During the persecution of the early Christians, some of the Christians gave in to the demands of the imperial edicts and either externally renounced their faith or gave up the Christian writings to be burned. These people were called '*traditores*,' the word in this context means 'traitor.' This was a derogatory title that the faithful Christians used on those Christians who had given in. Later, during times when there was less persecution some of these *traditores* tried to rejoin the Church. Certain former clergy members in Africa were given back their posts, much to the horror of many of the African Christians. These African Christians fought against allowing the men back into their former positions. This quarrel grew until the objecting Christians, who began to call themselves Donatists after a man named Donatus who was martyred, split from the rest of the Church, the catholics. They fought against the catholics and in later generations against anyone who the *traditor* clergy had ordained. The Donatists had their own group of martyrs which they commemorated. These men and women died for the Donatist cause, several of whom supposedly at the order of catholics.²²

The Reasons Behind the Arrests

The first question that should be asked when studying the Acts is why the persecutions were happening. The reasons that can be found within the recorded Acts are numerous, from simple disobedience of an imperial edict the most common reason, to outright provocation of the

²¹ Ibid, xxix.

²² Tilley, viii-ix.



Hans Holbein the Younger. *The Humiliation of the Emperor Valerian by the Persian King Sapor*. C. 1521. Inked. After his defeat and capture Valerian was used as a footstool by King Sapor in a parade in Persia.

local prefect. Listed below are a few cases from the Acts and elsewhere representing the reasons for the persecution of the Christians.

When Fructuosus was arrested and brought before governor Aemilianus, he was asked if he was aware of the edicts from the emperors.²³ Two such edicts were originally written by Emperor Valerian. The first edict, which does not survive, was issued c. 257, and supposedly commanded the Christian clergy to take part in the Roman sacrificial rites, and largely left the laity alone so long as they did not meet in assemblies.²⁴ The second edict, which only survives through the writings of bishop Cyprian, was issued the following year and permitted the arrest and execution of all Christian clergy and laymen; the clergy had previously only been exiled.²⁵ When Fructuosus denied that he knew the edicts and he refused to worship, and also denied the existence of any gods except his own God, the governor became angry with him and elaborated on the reasons for obeying the edicts. The opinion of the Romans, according to Governor Aemilianus, was that, “If the gods are not worshipped, then the images of the emperors are not adored.”²⁶ Not to worship the gods meant disobedience toward the emperors, tacitly treason, rightly punishable only by death.

Roughly half a century after the death of the bishop of Tarragona, Crispina was arrested in Africa during Diocletian’s reign.²⁷ Crispina was likewise asked about sacrificing, but she was unaware of any edicts, probably because they had only recently arrived. In this Act, like that of Bishop Fructuosus, the reader is given a reason behind the edicts: sacrificing to the gods for the

²³ Musurillo, 177.

²⁴ Keresztes, 83-84.

²⁵ Musurillo, 85.

²⁶ Ibid, 177-179. “*Si dii non coluntur, nec imperatorum vultus adorantur.*”

²⁷ Ibid, xlv.

welfare of the emperors. When Crispina refused to obey she, like Bishop Fructuosus, was essentially committing treason.²⁸

The persecutions were not solely limited to the clergy and laity of the church, there were also several instances of persecutions recorded within the Roman army. Julius, the veteran, was arrested and tried for disobedience to military order. He broke military order because he refused to fight any longer, claiming that it was wrong for a Christian to fight the battles of the world. The judge, rather reluctantly, convicted Julius and had him beheaded.²⁹

In a letter he wrote to Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger mentioned that he had sent out an edict to stop Christian meetings from occurring. He said, speaking of certain of the Christians he had questioned, “They stopped this custom after I published my edict, with which, following your commands, I prohibited such meetings.”³⁰ The original edict had come from the emperor, but men like Pliny, who worked in the provincial administration, published and executed the edicts.

Another reason for the persecutions was that many people and officials in the Roman government believed that the Christians were indulging in Thyestean feasts, cannibalism, and engaged in Oedipean marriages, incest, and thus they needed to all be killed.³¹ The accusation that they did these things was false. The people were misunderstanding two Christian customs. The first stemmed from the practice of the Sacrament of the Alter where the Christians would

²⁸ Ibid, 303.

²⁹ Ibid, 263-265.

³⁰ Pliny, 70; my translation. “*Quod ipsum facere desisse post edictum meum, quo secundum mandata tua heaerias esse vetueram.*”

³¹ Musurillo, 67.



Jean Antoine Théodore Giroust. Dallas Museum of Art. *Oedipus at Colonus*. 1788. Painting.

gather together and eat a meal of bread and wine calling it the body and blood of Christ.³² From the outside it looked as though they were saying they were actually eating and drinking human flesh and blood. The second misunderstanding came because they called each other brother and sister, leading people to believe that they were actually brothers and sisters, but the Christians meant it metaphorically to represent their relationship in Christ. Take for instance the opening of

³² Matthew 26:26-29.

Paul's letter to the Colossians where he says, "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ," where he uses the Greek word 'ἀδελφοί,'³³ meaning 'brothers and sisters.'³⁴

The Attitudes

While the most common official reason for the persecution of the Christians is clearly that they did not sacrifice to the gods when they were ordered to, that is not the only reason. The Romans were very concerned with the welfare of the empire and of the emperors. Everyone was expected to live a life of piety and obedience toward the emperors. But, here were the Christians living in disobedience and apparent impiety, cursing the gods and not honoring the emperors. For government officials, like Aemilianus, who were tasked with maintaining order and justice the Christians would have been a very annoying, if not downright dangerous, thorn in their side.

The edicts from the emperors clearly clashed with Christians. However, the common Roman and, indeed, Roman official, were not necessarily at odds with the Christians. There were certainly those Romans who, at times, hated the Christians, just like the pagan rhetorician Libanius who sometimes found himself hating the Christian monks.³⁵ But, there were also some who were their friends or possibly their students, as may have been the case of the people around Bishop Pionius.³⁶ There was no uniform opinion of the Christians.

According to the author of the *The Martyrdom of Saint Conon*, during the persecutions under Emperor Decius all the Christians in the town of Carmena, or perhaps the whole populace

³³ Colossians 1:2.

³⁴ Liddell, 11.

³⁵ Libanius, 197.

³⁶ Musurillo, 143.

of the town, fled the coming of an auxiliary soldier and the magistrate Naodorus. Only the old man Conon stayed behind. He and the soldier talked briefly, and from their conversation it is possible to tell that the soldier appears to have, at the very least, respected Conon, politely calling him “grandfather.”³⁷ However, the prefect that Conon was brought before showed quite the opposite, he pierced Conon’s heels with hooks and force-marched him until the old man died of exhaustion, and then went about his business as though nothing had happened.³⁸ In this Act there are two opposing views of the Roman bureaucracy, one man was kindly in his speech toward the elderly Christian, and the other had more care for his paperwork than for the life of the harmless old man.

In the city of Smyrna, Pionius was arrested with two of his followers and brought to trial.³⁹ After Pionius made a long speech to the judge, many pagan people of the city came and begged him, out of their love for him, to give in and sacrifice so that he might live.⁴⁰

While it was clearly shown, by their own words, that some of the pagans could, and did, love Christians, there was another prevalent opinion closer to that of Labinius and the prefect who martyred Conon.

A little over ten years after Pionius was arrested and killed, three young women, and several girls in their early teens, were arrested in Macedonia.⁴¹ At the end of their trial, after the judge finished reading off their charges, he says, “Whereas they adhere to the worthless and

³⁷ Ibid, 186-187. “Παππία.”

³⁸ Ibid, 191-193.

³⁹ Ibid, xxviii-xxix.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 143.

⁴¹ Ibid, xlii-xliii.

obsolete worship of the Christians which is hateful to all religious men, I sentence them to be given to the fire.” The judge, Dulcitius, did however, remit for a time the punishment for all of them except two women and Irene, as was said above.⁴² Dulcitius had a little compassion on the young girls for their age. But, he also showed his apparent hatred of Christians through his words, derogatorily referring to them all as sisters, in reference to a belief mentioned above that Christians lived incestuous lives. He forced the girl Irene first to be placed in a brothel and later, when she persisted in her supposed folly, to be killed by forcing her to climb onto an already burning pyre.⁴³

While Dulcitius may have shown his hatred of Christians there were other Roman judges who showed genuine concern for the men and women they were convicting. The judge, Maximus, who presided over the trial of Julius, the veteran, went to extreme ends to have the old honored soldier released. Maximus tried to convince Julius through bribes and complements. At one point he offered that “[I] take the blame... so that you may not give the impression of having consented voluntarily.”⁴⁴

In Pliny the Younger’s letter to Emperor Trajan, Pliny asked what he should do with the Christians he arrested and found guilty. He did not understand the reason for arresting the Christians or the crime they supposedly committed. He had arrested and punished many Christians, some because of anonymous information, at Emperor Trajan’s mandate, but wanted to be sure that he was doing as he should when he said, “I ordered those persisting in their

⁴² Ibid, 285-289; my translation. “Ἐτι εἰκαίαν καὶ ἔωλον καὶ στυγερὰν πᾶσι τοῖς καθωσιωμέωσις σέβουσαι τὴν τῶν Χριστιανῶν θηθησκίαν, πυρὶ ἐκέλευσα παραδοθῆναι.”

⁴³ Ibid, 291-293.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 262-263. “*Me assequatur... ne videaris volunrate adquevisse.*”



Photo by Carole Raddato. British Museum, 2013.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/caroleimage/9459432945/> Web. 20 March 2015. Gemstone portrait of Emperor Trajan and his wife Plotina.

confession and obstinance to be led off to execution.” He was concerned that he was killing innocents.⁴⁵ In a replying letter, Emperor Trajan reassured Pliny that he was acting as he was supposed to by releasing those who offered sacrifice and executing those who refused, adding further he said, “Truly, the indictments of an anonymous informer ought not to have a place in any accusation. For they are very bad examples to our generation.”⁴⁶ While still permitting the

arrest and persecution of Christians, Trajan permitted them the possibility of anonymity through his distrust of anonymous informants, thus only Christians found in the act of disobeying the edicts would be arrested.

The Christian Beliefs

Both Maximus and Pliny, although well intentioned, did not properly understand the conflict for the Christians. Considering the seemingly harmless nature of the minimal

⁴⁵ Pliny, 68-70; my translation. “*Perseverantes duci iussi.*” Literally the passage reads, “I ordered those persevering to be led.” I included “...confession and obstinance...” based on the context from earlier in the letter and, acting under the suggestion of Prof. A. Sherwin-White (175), I have inferred the intent for execution in the command *duci*.

⁴⁶ Trajan, 70-71; my translation. “*Sine auctore vero propositi libelli <in> nullo crimine locum habere debent. Nam et pessimi exempli nec nostri saeculi est.*”

requirement of sacrifice, offering incense to the gods on behalf of the emperors,⁴⁷ it was hard for them to understand why there was all this fuss. To understand the Christians better it is necessary to consider their beliefs and to look at some verses from the Bible regarding worship and life.

There is a common train of argument in the trials from the Acts, that of life and death. There are numerous instances where there is a misunderstanding between the questioner and the Christian. To the questioner, the Christians are choosing to stick to their folly and death, over a very minor issue and life, e.g. Crispina at her questioning.⁴⁸ To the Christians, life under the edicts of the emperors, or the pity of the questioner, is death. They were concerned with the good will of God, true life and eternal life.⁴⁹ A verse from John 17 sums up the belief that the early Christians held regarding eternal life: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”⁵⁰ The Christians held themselves to the standards found in the Bible, like that found in the Gospel of John. They could worship no other gods,⁵¹ because their “God is in the heavens...” while the pagan “idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands... those who make them become like them, so do all who trust them.”⁵² While the pagans worship gods made by men’s hands the Christians worship the creator of the heavens and the earth.⁵³

⁴⁷ Musurillo, 305.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 303.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 263.

⁵⁰ John 17:3.

⁵¹ Exodus 3:20.

⁵² Psalm 115:3-8.

⁵³ Acts 4:24.

The trial of Crispina gives a particularly insightful look at the stance and dilemma of the common Christian martyr regarding sacrifice. While her questioner, Anullinus, was trying to convince her of the virtue in sacrificing and the danger in disobedience she completely refused unless he was able to produce idols that were able to speak for themselves, then she would believe. She was, far from being afraid of death, thankful for it. She said, “I should be happy to lose my head for the sake of my God.” Worshiping deaf and dumb idols was ridiculous, and would put her soul in danger of hellfire; rather, she sought her own security in her God.⁵⁴ The Christians were mightily afraid of disobeying God, and with good reason, for Jesus said, “Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”⁵⁵ The life here on earth versus the life promised to them in heaven was not tantalizing enough. They were strongly devoted to their beliefs, even unto their deaths before hostile courts and crowds.

Another reason behind their seeming obstinance was that they were looking forward to what was promised to them after their deaths. Consider part of Fructuosus’ Act. On Friday morning when he was being led out to his death, the author of his Act said, “He was hastening joyfully and confidently to break his fast with the martyrs and prophets in heaven, ‘which the Lord has prepared for those who love him.’ ”⁵⁶ The author of Fructuosus’ Act quoted I Corinthians to supply Fructuosus’ reason to both break his fast and be so joyful as he went to his death. “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear hear, nor the heart of man imagined,

⁵⁴ Musurillo, 306-307. “*Caput meum libentissime pro Deo meo perdere desidero.*”

⁵⁵ Matthew 10:33.

⁵⁶ Musurillo, 178-179. “*Laetus atque securus festinabat, uti cum martyribus et prophetis in paradiso quem praeparavit Deus amantibus se solueret stationem.*”

what God has prepared for those who love him.’ ”⁵⁷ Before his death Fructuosus had been offered a cup of wine, drugged to lessen his pain in death, but he had refused claiming that he was still fasting, but would soon break his fast in heaven.⁵⁸ When the veteran Julius was walking from the prison to be executed a fellow soldier encouraged him reminding him of a promise in the Epistle of James.⁵⁹ “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”⁶⁰ The judges and pagans were looking to the virtues of the present life on earth, but the Christians were looking to the promises of the coming life in heaven.

Prayers and Petitions

Even knowing what the martyrs believed it is sometimes easy when reading through the Acts to begin to think that both sides hated each other, but this was not necessarily the case, as may be seen above. Ultimately, if the Christian martyrs lived according to the commands of the God they claimed to believe in, then they would have worked and spoken out of love for their persecutors. “Bless those who persecute you, pray for those who revile you,” these are the words that the Christians were to obey.⁶¹ In a few of these Acts the evidence for this attitude may be seen.

⁵⁷ I Corinthians 2:9.

⁵⁸ Musurillo, 179.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 265.

⁶⁰ James 1:12.

⁶¹ Luke 6:28.

In a letter that Justin Martyr wrote to Emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius he informed the emperors of the decline of justice in the provinces. A teacher and two other men that Justin knew were wrongly convicted and executed. He asked that the emperors correct the situation.⁶² Throughout the letter the reader is able to glean Justin's opinion of the emperors and the Roman state. He was not angry with the judges because they were not Christian, but because they were miscarrying justice, and, just as a loyal citizen should, he contacted the men who had the power to fix the problem. He made no effort at hiding the fact that he and the martyrs he was writing about were Christians. In the entire letter he was very respectful to the emperors.⁶³

Then there were the *Martyrs of Lyons*. These men and women were said to have prayed on behalf of their persecutors as St. Stephen did when he was martyred.⁶⁴ Likewise Cyprian, who told his judge that, "The God who made heaven and earth... this is the God to whom we Christians pay homage; night and day we supplicate him for you and for all mankind, as well as for the health of the emperors."⁶⁵ Cyprian even had his executioner paid 25 gold coins showing no ill will to the man.⁶⁶

But there are also those Acts that show signs of hatred, not only toward the pagan gods, but toward the people and the emperors. Hatred of the pagan gods was a common attitude of the

⁶² Musurillo, xvi.

⁶³ Ibid, 39-41.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 83.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 168-169. "*Deos qui fecit caelum et terram... huic Deo nos Christiani deservimus, hunc deprecamur diebus ac noctibus pro vobis et pro omnibus hominibus et pro incolumitate ipsorum imperatorum.*"

⁶⁶ Ibid, 175.

martyrs, take for instance the two martyrs, Crispina and Carpus, who each said, “May the gods perish who have not made heaven and earth.”⁶⁷

In *The Martyrdom of the Saintly Dasius*, Dasius, who was a soldier, essentially spat upon the names of the emperors and his fellow soldiers, who were even then reveling at a feast.⁶⁸ Then there was also the writer of another Act who defamed every pagan present, the centurion, soldiers, magistrates, and common men, calling them “priests... of the Devil,” and belittling their intelligence.⁶⁹

Reasons for the Acts

The content of the Acts varies in that some of the Acts are violent in their description of the torture the protagonists endured, while others focus more on the characters’ speech and dialogue. When we read the Acts it is important to be aware of the reasons behind why they were written and the mindset of the people who read them. Very few of the Acts have an open statement of purpose within them, but it is still possible to discern the goal behind the individual Acts. This can be accomplished through paying close attention to the words of the martyrs within each Act and who the martyr or martyrs being portrayed in the Acts were.

One Act of note gives its reasons in its opening paragraph. “Brothers, we too have a battle to wage... love and a sense of obligation have urged us to write this account, that we might leave to all future brethren a loyal witness to the grandeur of God and a historical record of our [labors]

⁶⁷ Ibid, 28-30; my translation. “*Dii, qui non fecerunt caelum et terram, pereant.*”

⁶⁸ Ibid, 279.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 199-201. “*Hoc est Diaboli sacerdotibus.*”

and our sufferings for the Lord.”⁷⁰ Most other Acts do not so blatantly give their reason for existing; usually the Acts are more subtle in how they convey their messages, relying heavily on their main character and his or her deeds.

The cast of characters in each Act also varies. It is possible to find people from all walks of life, and thereby fitting examples for people from all the different layers of society to admire or emulate. There is the Act about a centurion named Marcellus.⁷¹ Another is about Saturninus and Emeritus, a presbyter and Lector respectively, in the Donatist church.⁷² There are Acts about bishops, like Cyprian in Carthage,⁷³ or Irenaeus of Sirmium.⁷⁴ Euplus, who was a deacon.⁷⁵ There is one about a wealthy man in Rome named Apollonius, who may even have been from a senatorial family.⁷⁶ There is an Act concerning several girls only just into their teens and a pregnant woman.⁷⁷ And then an Act about the elderly man named Conon.⁷⁸ There are a plethora of examples for Christians, young and old, to look to for guidance. These great and small men, women and children, were all able by God’s grace to stand up to torments from man and devil.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 214-215. “*Et nobis est apud vos certamen, dilectissimi fratres... hic amor, hoc officium ad has nos impulit litteras ut fratribus post futuris et magnificentiae Dei fidele testimonium et labores ac tolerantiam nostri pro Domino memoriae relinqueremus.*”

⁷¹ Ibid, xxxvii.

⁷² Tilley, 35.

⁷³ Musurillo, 169.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 295.

⁷⁵ Ibid, xlv.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 91.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 281-285.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 187.

Voluntary Versus Involuntary

The majority of these martyrs that we have and will be considering in these chapters are what may be called involuntary martyrs. While they often admitted that they did not obey the edicts of the emperors, as in the case of a bishop in Africa,⁷⁹ and they openly refused to recant and accept the offers of acquittal, leading to their deaths by execution, as Saints Montanus and Lucius did,⁸⁰ these were men and women who did not initially seek martyrdom as their goal. From what we are able to understand in reading about the majority of these martyrs, up until their arrest and trials when their faith was put on the line, they did not grasp at martyrdom as anything more than a byproduct of their obedience to God. They were living their lives just as all the other people in the Roman Empire, except that they were Christian and did not worship at the pagan temples and were open about their beliefs when asked. Then one day they were arrested for the deviance in worship. That is the essence of an involuntary martyr: seeking obedience to God and confessing their faith to men whenever they may be asked. This is, of course, not to say that there were no voluntary martyrs, who sought death for God through actively antagonizing the Roman officials, or by some other means.

Here are four such stories of voluntary martyrs, or near martyrs in one case. The old man Conon, mentioned above, may or may not be considered a voluntary martyr, this really depends on information that is not available from the sources. He remained in the town in Phrygia after everyone else had fled the coming of the magistrate, and when he met the magistrate he spoke

⁷⁹ Ibid, 269-271.

⁸⁰ Ibid, xxxiv.

first, calling himself a Christian without being asked, but essentially asking to be arrested.⁸¹

While these blatant actions may be suggestive of a voluntary martyr, it may also be that as an old man it was not possible for him to flee, or that he was simply braver than the rest and trusted in God to bring about what he would.

The second story is a very odd one. In *The Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice*, the woman Agathonice, who had not been arrested but was merely an onlooker, cast herself into the fire that was burning under the two men, Carpus and Papyrus. These two men had been tried and convicted as Christians.⁸² Though her religion was being persecuted she was not under torture, question, or arrest. There was no call by the crowd or the two men being martyred for her to kill herself, she just jumped into the flames under her own volition.

Third, when Saint Cyprian was arrested and about to be martyred his congregation swarmed the house where he was being held and demanded that they also be martyred with him, harassing the proconsul and the man who owned the estate.⁸³ There is no mention of whether or not their demands were met, but if they had been martyred it is probable that the Act would have included that detail.

Finally there was the deacon Euplus. While a trial for an unrecorded matter was in session Euplus stood outside the closed curtain and shouted out, “I want to die; I am a Christian.”⁸⁴ The annoyed judge then called him inside temporarily dismissing the case he had been adjudicating and Euplus came into the room holding out the Christian scriptures before

⁸¹ Ibid, 187.

⁸² Ibid, 29.

⁸³ Ibid, 171-173.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 310-311. “Ἀποθανεῖν θέλω, Χριστιανὸς γάρ εἰμι.”

himself. He was shortly thereafter martyred for being a Christian and possessing the forbidden Christian scriptures.⁸⁵ Here again was a person who was neither arrested nor in any apparent danger of being so, considering the surprise and annoyance of the judge. Euplus actively went out and antagonized a Roman official in order to be martyred.

Conclusion

While the emperors and the common Roman citizen were worried about the wellbeing of the empire and were dutifully sacrificing to their gods and praying for aid the Christians were likewise praying for the wellbeing and health of their rulers and fellow Romans. Unfortunately the governmental administration did not consider the prayers and lifestyle of the Christians to be aiding the continued health of the empire, but instead to be one of the ailments. Through the pagan's misunderstanding of the Christian religion, and by a certain amount of mutual hatred, the persecutions of the Christians began. In all the horror of their new situation many of the Christians who would soon be martyred turned to one another and to the words of the Bible for comfort. They spoke encouragement and reminded each other of the promises they had been given and why it was that they had trusted God through their baptisms. Some blamed the government for the persecutions, some blamed Satan, and others simply trusted in the will of the one they worshipped.

We have been introduced to and now know enough of the situation and various elements of the Acts that we are now ready to look closer at two of their key aspects. We were introduced to many of the martyrs and the men persecuting them in this chapter. In the following chapters

⁸⁵ Ibid, 310-313.

we will consider the way that the martyrs treated the words of their holy book, the Bible, and their understanding of the one person many of them considered to be the primary antagonist and persecutor.

CHAPTER 2

THE EARLY MARTYRS AND THE BIBLE

Out of a desire to explain the terrible things that were happening to them, the early Christians often read into the Bible what may not have been there, both in the attempt to solidify their position and to bring themselves encouragement. This was often at the cost of a proper understanding of the Biblical text. They would take Bible verses out of their historical and immediate literary context, adapting the intended meaning to fit their own situations and to answer their Biblically illiterate questioners, and thus misuse them. Few of them had access to all the works that are considered part of the biblical cannon today, but through their use of the passages they were familiar with they showed their own lack of understanding for the words and the belief system they claimed to follow and for which they were dying.

In this chapter, we will be considering certain elements of the martyr Acts, specifically looking at those places where either the martyrs or the authors of the Acts paraphrased or used quotations from scripture. I have separated the verses by their placement in the Bible. I will first be looking at how the martyr Acts used verses from the Old Testament, then the New Testament, followed by how verses from both the Old and New Testament were used together. Finally I will look at some instances where the Acts properly applied Bible verses. For more information on each of the martyrs please refer back to Chapter 1.

The Old Testament

The first case study from the martyr Acts that we will examine in this chapter concerns



Unknown icon painter. *Prophet Jeremiah*. C. 1700. Painting.

the famous early Christian Justin Martyr.⁸⁶ In the questioning of Justin Martyr the prefect, after demanding that Justin obey the emperors by offering sacrifice to the gods and the emperors, asked about the beliefs and the place where Justin and his fellow Christians worshipped. Justin responded to him by delivering a beautifully succinct synopsis of the core doctrines of the Church. He then claimed that the Christians had no set place to worship, as the pagans did. There was no temple to their God where they went to

worship and offer sacrifice. The Christian God could not be confined in the works of human hands. Thus any Christian could worship wherever he might find community amongst his fellows.⁸⁷ He was saying, in essence, that the true God does not require a temple to live in, nor does he shrink to fit the ideas of man. He transcends time and space, and is present anywhere he wishes to be, to listen to the prayers of his people, or to communicate through prophecies. Justin then paraphrased a passage from the Prophet Jeremiah. “Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?

⁸⁶ On this martyr, see pp. 8.

⁸⁷ Musurillo, 49.

Declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth?”⁸⁸

In the context of the chapter of Jeremiah God was speaking against the false prophets in Israel. He, somewhat irately, described himself and asked if he was only at hand and not also far away. He did listen to the prayers of his people, but he was not bound to answer to the beck and call of men, or prophets in this case. Just as no man of the disobedient Israelites or false prophets could hide from him because he was everywhere, at all times, he is the omnipresent and omnipotent God, so also, according to Justin’s logic, the Christians could worship God while hiding from their persecutors and God would still find them. However, in the passage from Jeremiah it was the wicked, and not the righteous, who were trying to hide from God. While Justin was technically correct about God the verse he used had a negative meaning, and by using this verse in this manner he placed himself and the other Christians in the place of the wicked false prophets and the prefect as God searching them out.

The presbyter Pionius,⁸⁹ as he was being questioned openly before the people in Smyrna, reprimanded the pagans and the Jews for laughing or joking whenever a Christian voluntarily offered sacrifice, thus breaking their faith. Pionius reminded the pagans and Jews of a proverb from The Odyssey, and he partially quoted from Deuteronomy and the book of Proverbs.⁹⁰

“Men of Greece it behoved you to listen to your teacher Homer, who counsels that it is not a holy thing to gloat over those who are to die. And as for you, men of Judaea, Moses commands, if you should see the beast of your enemy fall down

⁸⁸ Jeremiah 23:23-24.

⁸⁹ On this martyr, see pp. 10.

⁹⁰ Musurillo, 139.

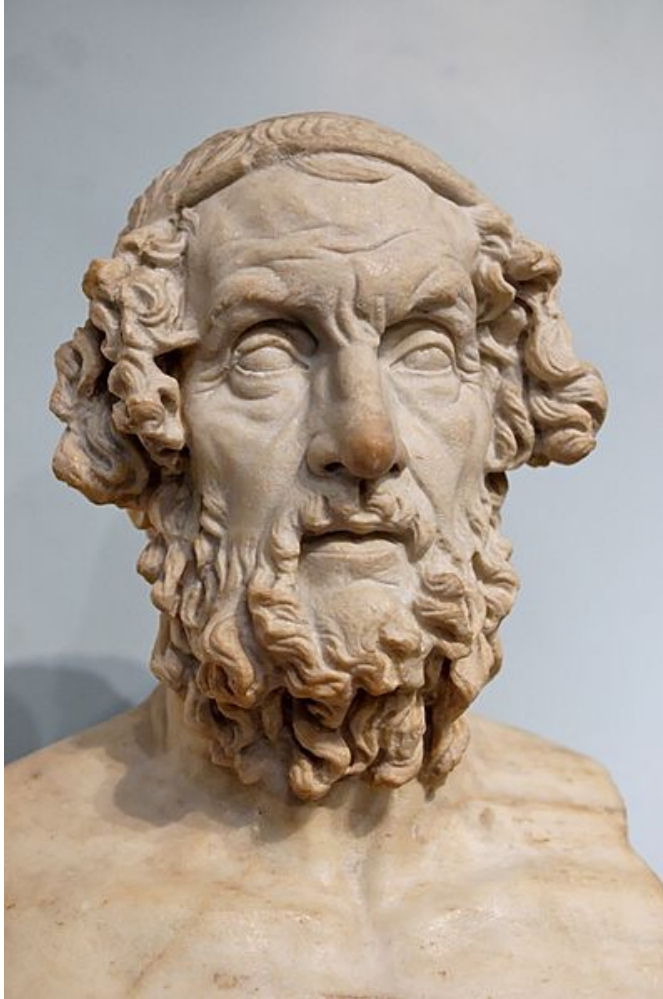


Photo by Marie Lan Nguyen. British Museum. Bust of Homer.

under his load, you shall not pass
by but you shall go and raise it up.
In like manner should you listen to
Solomon: if your enemy falls, he
says, do not rejoice, and do not be
glad when he stumbles.”⁹¹

The passage from the Odyssey reads as
follows: “Rejoice in your heart... restrain
yourself and do not cry aloud: it is not a
holy thing to boast over slain men.”⁹²

Pionius used these three together to show
the Greeks and the Jews that they should
not have been laughing and joking.

Pionius changed the verse from

Deuteronomy slightly to better fit his

criticism of the people. In this part of the Pentateuch, Moses was giving general laws for the
individual’s interaction with family and neighbors. The word used in the text is brother, not

⁹¹ Ibid, 138-139. “Ἔδει δὲ ὑμᾶς μέν, ὦ Ἕλληνες, πείθεσθαι τῷ διδασκάλῳ ὑμῶν Ὀμήρῳ, ὃς συμβουλεύει μὴ ὅσιον εἶναι ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀποθνήσκουσι καυχᾶσθαι. ὑμῖν δέ, ὦ Ἰουδαῖοι, μωΰσῃς κελεύει· Ἐὰν ἴδῃς τὸ ὑποζύγιον τοῦ ἐχθροῦ σου πεπτωλὸς ὑπὸ τὸν γόμον, οὐ παρελεύσῃ ἀλλὰ ἀνιστῶν ἀναστήσεις αὐτό. ὁμοίως καὶ Σολομῶντι ἔδει ὑμᾶς πείθεσθαι· Ἐὰν πέσῃ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου, φησί, μὴ ἐπιχαρῆς, ἐν δὲ τῷ ἠποσκελίσματι αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπαίρου.”

⁹² Homer, 22.411-412; my translation. “Ἐν θυμῷ... χαῖρε καὶ ἴσχεο μὴδ’ ὀλόλυξε· οὐχ ὅσῃ κταμένοισιν ἐπ’ ἀνδράσιν εὐχετάσθαι.”

enemy.⁹³ Pionius did not change anything in the verse from Proverbs, but instead oddly left out the second half of the thought. “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let your heart not be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.”⁹⁴ This passage from Proverbs was meant only for followers of the Jewish, and later Christian, God. Because the Torah would not have been read by the pagans, they would not have considered that it had any moral authority over them. It is possible that the Jews in the crowd would have known the verse he quoted and been able to fill in the other half of the Proverb.

Pionius included in his speech to the crowd elements that he believed would resonate with and serve as an effective warning to each of the three different groups. He chose Homer for the pagans, and Moses and Solomon for the Jews and Christians. But, the way that Pionius used Moses seems in part to indicate that he was adjuring the pagans and Jews to encourage the fallen Christians not to deny Christ, which makes little sense from their point of view. Yet by using the verse from Proverbs he was also warning them to guard their joy lest God cease the persecution of the Christians, effectively blaming God for the persecutions and supporting the persecutors in their acts of persecution.

While imprisoned in the city of Carthage the two members of the clergy, Montanus and Lucius,⁹⁵ as well as the others with them learned that the magistrates intended to have them burned alive for their profession of Christianity and refusal to sacrifice. According to the author of this Act they did not fear that they would be burned because “in [God's] hand are the words

⁹³ Deuteronomy 22:4.

⁹⁴ Proverbs 24:17-18.

⁹⁵ On these martyr, see pp. 9.

and the heart of the king.”⁹⁶ Multiple attempts to burn them apparently failed because of God's intervention. According to the author, every time that a fire was started God sent dew to douse the flames.⁹⁷ The author was paraphrasing Proverbs 21:1: “The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.” There was a slight joke between the unquoted section of the verse and the Act; the fires that the magistrates were attempting to use on the Christians were being put out by dew, ‘*rore*’ in the Latin of the text. The dew was the stream in God's hand, which implied that the men starting the fires were also the ones putting them out. The magistrates were intent on killing the Christians for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods, but they could do the Christians no harm without the permission of the Christian God. While the joke with dew and water is humorous the attitudes of the prisoners and the use of the verse seems to indicate not that they would be saved only from fire but from death entirely, which is contrary both to what the Act was relating, a story about the death of the martyrs, and to what the verse said. The proverb did not promise that God would save the innocent from the hands of the king, it merely said that the king's, any king's, actions were answerable to God.

Later in the Act of Montanus and Lucius, the author quoted Psalm 50:15, claiming both that God is primarily concerned with his own glory, and that he is mindful of the Christians and their prayers, proclaiming his mercy with this verse.⁹⁸ The Psalm he quoted, with its preceding verse, are as follows: “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and preform your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify

⁹⁶ Musurillo, 214-217. “*in manu [Dei] sermones et corda sunt regis.*”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 221.

me.”⁹⁹ The author of the Act was reminding his readers why there were martyrs, for God’s glory, and reassuring them that God cared about them and if they were arrested for their faith, all they needed to do was call to God for help and in his mercy he would answer. In the Psalm, attributed to a person known as Asaph, God was speaking to the world and all the people about sacrifice, that he did not desire nor in fact need the blood of animals. In his words: “Every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle... and all that moves in the field is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?”¹⁰⁰ God was proclaiming his own glory, referring to himself by multiple names throughout the verse, “The Mighty One, God the Lord,”¹⁰¹ in the first verse alone, yet he was also promising that he cared for the people and would help them. In the mindset of the martyrs and Christians the only sacrifice that God truly needed was that of his son, through his obedience and death on the Cross. The martyrs were following Christ’s example, but in the context of the verse from the book of Proverbs, Christ, the Messiah, was as of yet merely someone hoped for. The offer of help was meant for the nation as a whole against their surrounding enemies. And the indictment concerning sacrifice was a reminder to the nation of Israel why their sacrifices were different from those of the pagans all around them.

According to the author of this Act, Montanus also proclaimed at another time, in a prophetic voice, “He who sacrifices to the gods will be utterly destroyed, save to the Lord

⁹⁹ Psalm 50:14-15.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 50:10-13.

¹⁰¹ Ibid 50:1. According to the commentary on the text: “The Mighty One,” Hebrew: “El”; “God,” Hebrew: “Elohim”; “the Lord,” Hebrew: “Yahweh.”



Gerard Hoet and the Illustrators of the 1728 “Figures de la Bible” (left panel). Woodcutting. At the feet of Mt. Sinai as God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

only.”¹⁰² Montanus was quoting Exodus 22:20, which reads as follows: “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction.”¹⁰³

Likewise, at a different time and place, also in a different Act, Bishop Irenaeus quoted the same passage while being questioned. The Bishop had been ordered to sacrifice to the gods, but, almost like a philosopher, he answered, “He who sacrifices to the gods and not to God will be rooted out like a weed in a garden.”¹⁰⁴

Montanus was attempting to teach his fellow prisoners and strengthen them,

reminding them what God said, through Moses, would happen to those who did not worship him but fell to worshiping idols. Bishop Irenaeus seems almost to have confused the issue because,

¹⁰² Musurillo, 226-227. “*Sacrificans diis eradicabitur nisi Domino soli.*”

¹⁰³ Exodus 22:20. Vulgate, Exodus 22:20: “*qui immolat diis occidetur praeter Domino soli.*”

¹⁰⁴ Musurillo, 294-295; my translation. “*Qui diis et non Deo sacrificat eradicabitur.*”

rather than say Lord (*Dominus*) like Montanus, and the Vulgate would years later, Irenaeus brought the issue to the fore and used the dative singular (*Deo*) of the same word used by his questioner (*diis*, dative plural of the Latin word for god: *deus*). Montanus used a different name to separate himself from the pagan gods, but Irenaeus confronted the pagans claiming, in effect, that his single God was not just the one he worshiped, but with that single word, *Deo*, he was



Gerard Hoet and the Illustrators of the 1728 “Figures de la Bible” (right panel). Woodcutting.

claiming that his God was the greater God and the only one to be praised. The part of Exodus that both men paraphrased is a section where God, through Moses, was giving laws on social justice, and on proper physical and spiritual life.

While Montanus was using the verse as a warning to his fellow prisoners Irenaeus used it as an evasive answer to his judge. The Christians around Montanus would have understood him and been encouraged, but the judge presiding over Irenaeus’ case would not have acknowledged

the authority of the verse and would have instead seen Irenaeus as even more of a social disturbance for denying the authority of the pagan gods.

During the banquet celebrating the joint birthday of Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, Marcellus,¹⁰⁵ a centurion, stood up and claimed to be a soldier of Christ alone, who the centurion claimed was the true king. Marcellus also said, “From now I cease to serve your emperors and I despise the worship of your gods of wood and stone, for they are deaf and dumb images.”¹⁰⁶ The section of the Bible that Marcellus was paraphrasing is Psalm 115:4-6. Oddly, he did not include the rest of the thought from the Psalm that gives a rather disturbing warning, which would have been fitting for him to say to the revelers.

“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. *Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust them*” (emphasis mine).¹⁰⁷

This Act was very potent in its message largely because the martyr, whose story the Act told, confessed and was arrested at a banquet held in honor of the men who were essentially responsible for the deaths of all the martyred Christians. This Act, through Marcellus, also conjoined the worship of the emperors with that of idols. If God condemned idol worship, he therefore also condemned the worship of the emperors. But, if Marcellus’ desire was to warn his

¹⁰⁵ On this martyr, see pp. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Musurillo, 250-251. “*Amodo imperatoribus uestris militare desisto, sed et deos uestros ligneos et lapideos adorare contemno, quia sunt idola surda et muta.*”

¹⁰⁷ Psalm 115:4-8.

fellow soldiers and persuade them to believe in Christ, as seems to be indicated by the fact that he stood up in the middle of the feast and spoke these things to the men about him, it would have made more sense for him to have included the rest of the Psalm. In the Psalm God indicted the nations for questioning his existence. He mocked their empty, lifeless gods, and called upon his people, Israel, to trust in him, promising blessings and all the earth as theirs.¹⁰⁸ Then again, the celebration at the feast did not consist of sacrificing to the pagan gods, but was rather just a feast in honor of the long lives of the two emperors. So long as Marcellus was not told to offer sacrifices, and the text makes no mention of any sacrifices, or told to worship the emperors, there should have been nothing objectionable to him participating in the feast.

While being questioned, Crispina¹⁰⁹ and her questioner began arguing over whether or not she was being sacrilegious. The prefect was convinced that she would not be committing sacrilege if she were to obey the edicts given by the emperor, while she was asserting that if she sacrificed to the pagan gods, she would thereby commit sacrilege against her God and she would be destroyed at once.¹¹⁰ When she said she would be destroyed, she probably meant spiritually rather than physically. Finally she retorted angrily and cursed the pagan gods.

“May the gods perish who have not made heaven and earth! I offer sacrifice to the eternal God, continuing in the generations of ages, who is truly God and to be feared, who made the sea the green herbs and dry earth; but what are men made

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 115:1-16.

¹⁰⁹ On this martyr, see pp. 6.

¹¹⁰ Musurillo, 304.

by him able to offer me?”¹¹¹

Her curse was a paraphrase of something God told the Prophet Jeremiah, to tell to the nations. God told Jeremiah: “Thus shall you say to them: ‘The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’”¹¹² Crispina also pointed indirectly to a category of verses from the Bible that placed the formation of human life in God’s hands, such as this one from the book of Psalms: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.”¹¹³

What God said through Jeremiah was no wish or command but an assertion. The issue Jeremiah was tasked with preaching against was that the Israelites were worshiping at pagan altars and ignoring their God. In his anger against the Israelites God promised, through Jeremiah and others, that he would punish Israel and he would destroy the pagan idols. Crispina, in cursing the gods, was separating herself from the Christian *traditores*¹¹⁴ who, like the Israelites of old, had gone and worshiped at pagan altars earning the wrath of God. The gods made by men could be of no aid to her or to the people of the empire, all of whom were created by God’s hands. As correct as she was regarding the belief of the early Church, she did not actually answer her questioner regarding sacrilege in a way that he would understand. Her claim about the Christian God could and would easily have been confused with any number of Pagan gods, from Uranus and Gaia to Zeus.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 304; my translation. “*Dii, qui non fecerunt caelum et terram, pereant! Ego sacrifico Deo aeterno, permanenti in saecula saeculorum, qui est Deus verax et metuendus, qui fecit mare et herbas virides et aridam terram; homines autem facti ab ipso quid mihi possunt praestare?*”

¹¹² Jeremiah 10:11.

¹¹³ Psalm 139:13.

¹¹⁴ On this term, see pp. 11.

The New Testament

Now that we have considered several instances of how the Old Testament is used in the Acts we may move on to consider how the New Testament is used. Let us turn first to the *Martyrs of Lyons*.¹¹⁵ The author of this Act used a quote from Romans 8 in his description of the state and attitude of the martyrs as they faced the persecution prepared for them. God raised them up as pillars to withstand the persecution and as they charged into battle they were able to endure every torment and, according to the author, they proved the validity of what Paul said in Romans.¹¹⁶ “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”¹¹⁷

The martyrs were supposedly undergoing afflictions due to the hatred of the pagans and at the direction of the Devil, called the “Evil One” in this Act. According to the author, no amount of torment and pain was able to burden the martyrs as they ran on toward Christ.¹¹⁸ The author’s use of what Paul wrote seems to indicate that Paul’s words were proved true because the martyrs, although they were heavily afflicted, suffered no pain and made light of the torments. But, Paul was denying the worth of comparing the present sufferings to coming glory. He was not saying that the sufferings would be any less because of the coming glory, on the contrary. Shortly after in the passage Paul repeatedly spoke of groaning from great pain, like that of childbirth, and the wait before the time when the glory was revealed and the believers would be redeemed and adopted as sons of God. The glorious reward of redemption and adoption was so

¹¹⁵ On this martyr, see pp. 9.

¹¹⁶ Musurillo, 63.

¹¹⁷ Romans 8:18.

¹¹⁸ Musurillo, 63.



Rembrandt. Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg. *St. Paul at his Writing-Desk*. C. 1633. Panting.

great that the trials of life and the years of waiting were not worth considering no matter how great. There came a time, while Montanus and Lucius were in prison, when the governor decided to have them all violently tortured almost without stop for several days. According to the author the torments were terrible but they did not feel them because of the shielding of the Lord. For proof the author, paraphrasing I Corinthians

15:54-55, said: “To God’s servants it is easy to be killed; and hence death is nothing when the Lord crushes its sting, conquers its struggle, and triumphs by the trophy of the cross.”¹¹⁹ The author was claiming that those martyrs felt, and also therefore future martyrs would feel, no pain in death because the Lord had conquered death.

While Paul did say that death lost its sting to Jesus’ victory, he also clarified what he meant by sting. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”¹²⁰ Paul was

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 216-217. “*Nam et occidi servis Dei leve est, et ideo mors nihil est, cuius aculeos comminuens contentionemque devincens dominus per trophaeum crucis triumphavit.*”

¹²⁰ I Corinthians 15:56.

explaining that Christians would one day leave their perishable bodies so as to be able to inherit the kingdom of God and instead take on imperishable bodies free from death and sin.¹²¹ He made no mention that death would be any easier; merely that it would no longer have any power beyond destroying perishable bodies.

In his trial, Apollonius¹²² gave a speech to the prefect Perennis concerning the end of all men, death. All men die, but Christians must die daily to pleasure and the sinful desires of the heart. No one among his, Apollonius', followers would be found in undisciplined pleasure. They did not find physical death a hard thing because "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."¹²³ In his speech to the Prefect Apollonius used what Paul said in I Corinthians 15 and Romans 14 and also what Jesus said In Matthew 5 to back his claims about how Christians should live and die.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul said: "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."¹²⁴ And in Corinthians, while addressing the issue of resurrection from death, Paul said: "I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!"¹²⁵ In Matthew, Jesus was preaching on the subject of lust and said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."¹²⁶

¹²¹ Ibid, 15:50-53.

¹²² On this martyr, see pp. 5.

¹²³ Musurillo, 97-99. "Εἴτε γὰρ ζῶμεν εἴτε ἀποθνήσκομεν, τοῦ Κυρίου ἐσμέν."

¹²⁴ Romans 14:8.

¹²⁵ I Corinthians 15.

¹²⁶ Matthew 5:27-28.

Apollonius tried to imply that Christians were above reproach obeying what Jesus said and by implication were better than the pagans. Christians died daily to their sins and both lived and died to the Lord. Paul, in Romans, was lecturing on how to live in honor of the Lord and to deny ourselves.¹²⁷ And in Corinthians Paul was expounding on the importance to the faith of Christians that the dead would be raised, how nothing they could do mattered if Christ would not raise the dead when he came into his kingdom. He was not speaking on Christians dying to pleasure.¹²⁸ Where he said that he died daily it is possible that he was referring back to Psalm 44:22: “Yet for your (God’s) sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered,” there is no clear reason given for the speakers’ death. Jesus was warning against even permitting an immoral thought, but was not condemning all pleasure, just immoral pleasures.

The bishops Agapius and Secundinus¹²⁹ were brought to the local prefect after their return from exile for questioning and to, once again, be asked to sacrifice to the gods. Their refusal previously had led to their initial exile. According to the author of the Act: “There they were conducted not (I insist) from one penalty to another, as the pagans might think, but rather ‘from glory to glory,’ from one contest to another.”¹³⁰ The author quoted a small part of a verse from II Corinthians in order to contrast what was physically happening to the two bishops with what was happening to them spiritually. “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of

¹²⁷ Romans 14:5-8.

¹²⁸ I Corinthians 15:20-32.

¹²⁹ On these martyrs, see pp. 9.

¹³⁰ Musurillo, 196-197. “*Perducebantur, inquam, non a poena (sicut gentilibus videbatur) ad poenam, sed a gloria potius ad gloriam, a certamine ad certamen aliud.*”

the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”¹³¹

While in the Act the two bishops were being brought before the prefect to eventually be tried and martyred, in reality, according to the author, they were being sent to see God and to be brought into a greater glory through death. But the life with God after death was not the new glory which Paul was speaking about. Only a few verses before, Paul spoke of the blindness of the heart of man, veiled like Moses’ face.¹³² Moses veiled his face when he returned to the camp of the Israelites, after he spoke with God on Mount Sinai. His face shown so brightly that the people were afraid to look at him and see God’s glory.¹³³ What Paul was actually speaking about was that after a person was redeemed through faith in Christ, the blindness of their heart toward God was removed and the Spirit of God began right then to change the new Christian into Christ’s image. Paul laid the foundation in verse 16 for the meaning of what he said: “But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”¹³⁴ This is not a change that only happens at death or necessarily in the acts immediately leading up to death.

In the the *Martyrs of Lyons*, the author contrasted the martyrs with the pagans. There were certain Christians who had initially denied their faith and would thus have been *traditores* if not for what happened next. When those Christians were later brought in for some final questioning, they confessed Christ as their lord, much to the surprise of the pagans. The thought had been to question them apart from the Christians who had not recanted initially and then to

¹³¹ II Corinthians 3:18.

¹³² Ibid 3:7-18.

¹³³ Exodus 34.

¹³⁴ II Corinthians 3:16.



Duccio di Buoninsegna. Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena. *Betrayal of Jesus*. C. 1255. Painting. A painting of Judas betraying Jesus on a panel of Duccio's Maesta.

release them.¹³⁵

“There remained outside, however, all those who had never enjoyed even a vestige of the faith nor any knowledge of the wedding garment nor any thought of the fear of God; rather by their way of life they blasphemed the Way (the Christian beliefs). And these were the sons of perdition (the pagans).”¹³⁶

The author of the Act, in describing the pagans, referred to two passages from the Bible which should have been familiar to the early Christians. The first was his use of ‘wedding

¹³⁵ Musurillo, 77.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 76-77. “Εμειναν δὲ ἔξω οἱ μὴδὲ ἵχνος πώποτε πίστεως μὴδὲ αἴσθησιν ἐνδύματος νυμφικοῦ μὴδὲ ἐννοίαν φόβου θεοῦ σχόντες ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τῆς ἀναστροφῆς αὐτῶν βλασφημοῦντες τὴν ὁδόν, τοῦτέστιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς ἀπωλείας.”

garment,' which came from a parable Jesus told in Matthew about the Kingdom of Heaven. A king invited many important people from his land to come to his son's wedding feast, but when they all excused themselves and abused his messengers the king had them all killed and then brought people off the streets into the wedding feast. Any who entered the feast without wearing wedding garments were bound and then cast into the outer darkness by order of the king.¹³⁷ The second passage was used to apply a term to the pagans, which Jesus used of Judas, the man who was even then betraying him.

“While I was with them (the disciples), I kept them in your name (God's), which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of [perdition], that the scripture might be fulfilled.”¹³⁸

When Jesus prayed this, Judas had already left several chapters earlier, in John 13, to gather soldiers to arrest Jesus. Eleven of Jesus' twelve disciples would, after many trials, stay faithful to Jesus and preach about him, and therefore not be lost. Only Judas betrayed Jesus and never came back. He was the only one lost and the one who committed the ultimate betrayal, which is why Jesus called him the “son of perdition.”

The author of the Act here wanted to use these to show the decrepit nature of the pagans as people who refused to accept what God offered and were as wicked as Judas, who led Jesus to his death. However, if the parable of the wedding feast is to be compared to the Christian faith and the wedding garments as the outward lifestyle of a Christian,¹³⁹ then those people who

¹³⁷ Matthew 22:1-14.

¹³⁸ John 17:12. ESV has 'destruction' instead of 'perdition.'

¹³⁹ Consider the words from Matthew 10:33: “Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "Die Bibel in Bildern." 1860. Woodcutting. God creating earth with his voice.

entered the feast but were then cast out cannot be equated with the pagans in the Act. The people who did not wear wedding garments are like Christians who accepted Christ but then denied him before the world. The pagans at no point accepted Christ. Furthermore, Judas, the son of perdition, was a follower of Jesus who then betrayed him, not a pagan outsider who simply arrested him.

The Inter-Testament References

In the previous two sections of this chapter we looked at how the Acts used Old

Testament and New Testament scripture in isolation. We will now consider how the Acts used excerpts from both Testaments together.

The favorite quotation to use in the martyr Acts was the beginning of a prayer that the disciples said aloud after Peter and other of the disciples were released from the custody of the Jewish High Priest; they had been arrested for preaching about Jesus.¹⁴⁰ “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted up their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...’”¹⁴¹ The prayer continued with them quoting from the psalms and promising to continue to preach boldly.¹⁴² The beginning of the prayer was a partial quotation from Exodus 20, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The quote came specifically from the commandment to rest on the Sabbath and to keep it holy. “For six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”¹⁴³

There are many Acts that use this prayer of the Apostles to justify why the martyrs were resisting the edicts of the emperors. When asked who he was Apollonius said: “Yes, I am a Christian, and hence I worship and fear the God who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.”¹⁴⁴ When Pionius was asked which god he worship he answered: “The God who is

¹⁴⁰ Acts 4:1ff.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 4:23-24.

¹⁴² Ibid 4:25-30.

¹⁴³ Exodus 20:11.

¹⁴⁴ Musurillo, 90-91. “Ναί, Χριστιανός εἰμι· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸν θεὸν τὸν ποιήσαντα τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς σέβομαι καὶ φοβοῦμαι.”

almighty, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and all of us.”¹⁴⁵ At the beginning of his questioning Cyprian¹⁴⁶ affirmed: “I am a Christian, and a bishop. I recognize no other gods but the one true God who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.”¹⁴⁷ Fructuosus¹⁴⁸ responded to the edict of the emperors that everyone must worship the gods saying: “I worship the one God who has made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.”¹⁴⁹ At his court-martial, the veteran soldier Julius¹⁵⁰ told the prefect: “I was in the army, and when I had served my term I re-enlisted as a veteran. All of this time I worshiped in fear the God who made heaven and earth, and even to this day I show him my service.”¹⁵¹ Standing alone before the prefect the young girl Irene,¹⁵² when asked if she was prepared to sacrifice to the gods, answered: “No, I am not prepared, for the sake of the God almighty who has created heaven and earth and the seas and all that is in them. For those who transgress the word of God there awaits the great judgement of eternal punishment.”¹⁵³ And Crispina, who had just been told that all of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 146-147. “Τὸν θεὸν τὸν παντοκράτορα τὸν ποιήσαντα τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ πάντας ἡμᾶς.”

¹⁴⁶ On this martyr, see pp. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Musurillo, 168-169. “*Christianus sum et episcopus. Nullos alios deos novi nisi unum et verum deum qui fecit caelum et terram, mare et quae sunt in eis omnia.*”

¹⁴⁸ On this martyr, see pp. 7.

¹⁴⁹ Musurillo, 178-179. “*Ego unum Deum colo qui fecit caelum et terram et mare et omnia quae in eis sunt.*”

¹⁵⁰ On this martyr, see pp.8.

¹⁵¹ Musurillo, 262-263. “*Sub arma militiae, et ordine meo egressus veteranus. Semper timens Deum qui fecit coelum et terram colui, cui etiam nunc exhibeo servitatem.*”

¹⁵² On this martyr, see pp. 7.

¹⁵³ Musurillo, 288-289. “Οὐχί, οὐκ εἰμι ἐτοίμη ποιῆσαι διὰ τὸν παντοκράτορα Θεὸν τὸν κτίσαντα οὐρανὸν τε καὶ γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς. μεγάλη γὰρ δίκη αἰωνίου βασάνου τοῖς παραβαίνουσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ.”

Africa had sacrificed and that she ought to follow their example, retorted: “May they never find it easy to make me offer sacrifice to demons: but I sacrifice to the Lord who has made heaven and earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.”¹⁵⁴

What was originally meant merely as an explanation for why the commandment concerning the Sabbath was given, and later used as the opening to a prayer of thanksgiving and praise became a quote dear to the martyr cause. The quote was used exclusively as a reason why the martyrs only worshiped the Christian God, but neither the quote, nor the commandment it comes from, contains any admonishment against worshiping other gods. The pagans, who were mostly polytheists, would easily have been confused by the quote because the words: “the almighty God,” or “the God who made heaven and earth,” etc, could easily be understood as referring to Jupiter or any other powerful pagan creator god. A better alternative quote from the Bible that could have been used to clarify the Christian position is this: “You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”¹⁵⁵ Quoting something like this to a prefect would at least have explained the situation, and made him understand that Christianity was at least a little similar to the monotheistic religion of the Jews. Yet, there was the issue of authority. It is clear that many of the martyrs believed that there was something behind the pagan statues. Take for instance what Crispina said: “May they never find it easy to make me offer sacrifice to demons.”¹⁵⁶ Martyrs like Crispina understood that there was some credence to the beliefs of the pagans, but the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 304-305. “*Numquam bene sit illis, ut me daemoniis faciant sacrificare, nisi uni Deo qui fecit caelum et terram mare et omnia quae in eis sunt.*”

¹⁵⁵ Exodus 20:3, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Musurillo, 304-305. “*Numquam bene sit illis, ut me daemoniis faciant sacrificare.*”

authority and power of the Christian God was greater. He was the greatest and most powerful because he created everything, and should dutifully have been obeyed. Yes, the other verses like those from Exodus 20:3 and 20:5 make great reasons for worship, but they do not set up the foundation of their authority as Acts 4:24 and Exodus 20:11 are able to. Still, such assertions are of no use when they are not understood.

In the closing paragraph of the Act concerning Fructuosus the author gives an eulogy to him and his companions commending them and claiming that they earned their place in heaven with Christ. He also describes them by quoting and paraphrasing from several parts of the Bible. He pulls first from Proverbs, they were tested in fire, a pun in that the martyrs were killed by being burnt alive; Ephesians, they wore a breastplate and helmet; I Peter, they earned an unfading crown; and Genesis, they trod the devil's head underfoot.¹⁵⁷

“Ah, blessed martyrs, who were tested in fire like precious gold, clad in the breastplate of faith and the helmet of salvation, crowned with a diadem and crown that does not fade because they trod underfoot the devil's head!”¹⁵⁸

In the book of Proverbs, the writer compared the crucible and furnace for silver and gold to how God tested the hearts of men.¹⁵⁹ In Ephesians, Paul was writing metaphorically about the different parts of spiritual living, using a suit of armor. There was the “belt of truth;” the “breastplate of righteousness,” not of faith as in the Act; the “shoes of the gospel of peace;” the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 185.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 184-185. “*O beati martyres in igni probati sicut aurum pretiosum, vestiti loricam fidei et galeam salutis, qui coronati sunt diademate et corona immarcescibili eo quod Diaboli caput calcaverunt!*”

¹⁵⁹ Proverbs 17:3.

“shield of faith;” the “helmet of salvation;” and finally the “sword of the spirit.”¹⁶⁰ In Peter’s epistle Peter was writing to bishops and leaders within the church and said that when Christ returned they would earn an unfading crown.¹⁶¹ And in Genesis, God was giving Adam and Eve the prophecy about the salvation of man when Eve’s offspring would crush the serpent who tricked them into disobeying God.¹⁶²

While the martyrs certainly showed their faith and were tried by fire, and the belief was that they received their crown, they did not actually crush the devil’s head as the writer said. They did defeat the devil in that they did not succumb to the pressure and give up their faith in Christ, but they did not crush his head in the same sense as what is in the verse in Genesis. In Genesis, God said specifically that a single man of Eve’s offspring would crush the serpent’s, the devil’s, head: a single male individual in the future who would defeat the serpent who had led all of mankind to sin. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”¹⁶³ God spoke generally at first about their mutual offspring and then changed to a more particular subject when he was speaking of the time when the serpent would have his head bruised. Ultimately, this one man, in bruising the serpent’s head, would defeat the serpent once and for all. According to the Christian system of belief, this would have been accomplished once and for all when Christ died on the cross, not each and every time someone was martyred.

¹⁶⁰ Ephesians 6:13-17. “...τὴν ὁσφὺν ὑμῶν ἐν ἀληθείᾳ... τὸν θώρακα τῆς δικαιοσύνης... τοὺς πόδας... τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τῆς εἰρήνης... τὸν θυρεὸν τῆς πίστεως... τὴν περικεφαλαίαν τοῦ σωτηρίου... τὴν μάχαιραν τοῦ πνεύματος...”

¹⁶¹ I Peter 5:4.

¹⁶² Genesis 3:15.

¹⁶³ Ibid.



Roman Catholic Saints. *Saint Pionius*. <<http://www.roman-catholic-saints.com/saint-pionius.html>>. Painting. Web. 20 March 2015.

After Pionius had been arrested and thrown into prison many local pagans came to try and persuade Pionius and those with him to relent and save their lives, but the pleas of the pagans were ignored. Meanwhile, many more Christians who had only recently been arrested were also brought in lamenting their sorry state. Pionius wept when he heard them and spoke to them mixing many Bible verses into his speech.¹⁶⁴ Due to the length of the speech, I will be examining it verse by verse.

First Pionius said, “I am tormented anew, and I am torn limb from limb, when I see the pearls of the Church being trampled by swine.”¹⁶⁵ Here he was quoting from Matthew where Jesus was warning people to seek purity in their own lives before correcting or judging others for their failings, because God

would hold them to their own standards. When they had brought themselves to proper order before God, then they would be fit to help others.¹⁶⁶ Jesus closed his warning with these words: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Musurillo, 151.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 150-151. “Καινῇ κολάσει κολάζομαι, κατὰ μέλος τέμνομαι ὁπῶν τοὺς μαργαρίτας τῆς ἐκκλησίας ὑπὸ τῶν χοίρων καταπατουμένους.”

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 7:1-5

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 7:6.

“The stars of heaven being swept down to earth by the dragon’s tail.”¹⁶⁸ Pionius chose a verse from the biblical book the Revelation of Saint John. John, was recording a sign he was shown while on the Isle of Patmos, a sign of a woman about to give birth fleeing into the desert pursued by a red dragon intent on devouring her child. The dragon at one point swept a third of the stars from heaven down to earth.¹⁶⁹ This was possibly referring to those angels that were cast out of heaven with Satan since earlier stars were used in Revelation to represent angels, e.g. 1:20 and 9:1. However, it looks more as though Pionius meant the stars to represent those Christians who had just been arrested by the Romans, who were in turn represented as the Dragon’s tail.

“The vine which the right hand of God planted being ravaged by the solitary wild boar, so that all those who pass by on the road may pluck its fruit.”¹⁷⁰ This is a paraphrasing of one of the Psalms that told an allegory about Israel. In the Psalm, Israel is pictured as a vine. “You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it... Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forrest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.”¹⁷¹ This Psalm was a prayer by the Northern Israelites for the return of God’s favor because God appeared to have abandoned them on account of their disobedience. They begged in the Psalm for God’s protection from their enemies, the boar, which probably represented the Assyrians.¹⁷² In the context of the verse it

¹⁶⁸ Musurillo, 150-151. “Τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὑπὸ τῆς οὐπᾶς τοῦ δράκοντος εἰς τὴν γῆν σεσυρμένους.”

¹⁶⁹ Revelation 12:2-4.

¹⁷⁰ Musurillo, 150-151. “Τὴν ἄμπελον ἣν ἐφύτευσεν ἡ δεξιὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὸ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ μονιοῦ λυμαينوμένην· καὶ ταύτην νῦν τρυγῶσι πάντες οἱ παραπορευόμενοι τὴν ὁδόν.”

¹⁷¹ Psalm 80:8, 12-13.

¹⁷² Ibid 80:2-4, 14, 18-19.

would seem that Pionius was saying that God had abandoned his people, but that does not seem to be what Pionius intended considering the rest of his speech.

“My little children, once again I bear you in travail until Christ shall be formed within you.”¹⁷³ This is a direct quote from Paul’s epistle to the Galatians where Paul was telling them of his concern for their sudden change in attitude toward him; from one of the greatest care, toward the loss of of their former faith in Christ.¹⁷⁴ Pionius likewise seems concerned about the wailing of those just brought into prison, not over their rejection of Christ, they had not rejected Christ, rather he was concerned for their lack of faith in Christ.

“My tender sons have travelled rough roads.”¹⁷⁵ This is a quote from the book of Baruch which is no longer considered canonical, but was used as a holy text in certain of the early Church bodies. In this part of the book Jerusalem was pictured weeping for her people and warning them to turn back to God, her people were traveling rough roads away from God but she said that God would remember them.¹⁷⁶ Pionius seems to be implying that the Christians who were wailing as they were brought into the prison were astray from God.

“Once again do the vicious old men spy on Susanna; now do they discover the delicate and lovely girl, to be filled with her beauty and utter lies against her.”¹⁷⁷ Here Pionius was again

¹⁷³ Musurillo, 150-151. “Τεκνία μου οὐς πάλιν ὠδίνω ἕως οὗ μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν.” (Galatians has “μέχρις” for “ἕως,” both meaning “until,” otherwise both the Act and the verse from Galatians are the same.)

¹⁷⁴ Galatians 4:8-20.

¹⁷⁵ Musurillo, 150-151. “Οἱ τυφεροί μου ἐπορεύθησαν ὁδοὺς τραχείας.”

¹⁷⁶ Baruch 4:9-28.

¹⁷⁷ Musurillo, 150-151. “Νῦν ἡ Σωσάννα ἐνεδρεύθη ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνόμων πρεσβυτέρων, νῦν ἀνακαλύπτουσι τὴν τρυφεράν καὶ καλήν, ὅπως ἐμπλησθῶσι τοῦ κάλλους αὐτῆς καὶ ψευδῇ καταμαρτυρήσωσιν αὐτῆς.”



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "Die Bibel in Bildern." 1860. Woodcutting. King Xerxes choosing Esther to be his wife.

quoting from a book which is no longer considered canonical, but was likewise used as a holy text by some in Pionius' time. Susanna was the virtuous and beautiful wife of a rich man in Babylon named Joakim. Many of the Jews came to Joakim to arbitrate for them. Two elders amongst the Jews became infatuated with Susanna's beauty and tried to force her to lie with them, but she refused. They then accused her before her husband of having an affair with an unknown man. She was found innocent, by miraculous means, and the elders were put to death in her place.¹⁷⁸ The rulers who were arresting the Christians were clearly meant to be represented

¹⁷⁸ Susanna.

by the immoral elders and the Christians by Susanna who was wrongly convicted and still virtuous. This is somewhat at odds with what Pionius implied by his previous words from Baruch.

“Now again is [Haman] made drunk, and Esther and the whole city is in terror.”¹⁷⁹

Pionius here used part of the book of Esther to express the attitude of the imprisoned Christians. The part of Esther that Pionius quoted from was just as Haman, an enemy of the Jews, managed to convince king Xerxes to authorize the execution of all the Jews in the Persian empire at a set date in the future, sending the whole of the city of Susa into confusion. After the proclamation was sent out Haman and the king sat down to drink. Esther, incidentally, was the king’s wife and a Jewess.¹⁸⁰ Pionius was comparing his fellow prisoners to the Jews within Suza and their accusers to Haman, again placing the Christians in the position of the innocents.

“Have all the virgins completely nodded and fallen asleep?”¹⁸¹ This comes from a parable Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven. There were ten virgins who went out with lamps to meet their bridegroom. Five were wise and brought along extra oil for their lamps and five were foolish and had only the oil in their lamps. The bridegroom delayed in coming and they all fell asleep. When he did arrive during the night they were startled awake and, while the wise virgins were prepared and had enough oil to light their way, the foolish virgins were unprepared and had to run to get new oil. Because they were unprepared they missed the bridegroom and were left outside.¹⁸² It is odd that Pionius focused here on the fact that the virgins slept when the point of

¹⁷⁹ Musurillo, 150-154. “Νῦν ὁ Ἀμὰν κωθωνίζεται, Ἑσθὴρ δὲ καὶ πᾶσα πόλις ταρασσεται.”

¹⁸⁰ Esther 3:8-15.

¹⁸¹ Musurillo, 152-153. “Ἡ πάντως ἐνύσταξαν πᾶσαι οἱ παρθένοι καὶ ἐκάθευδον;”

¹⁸² Matthew 25:1-13.

the parable was that Christians ought to be prepared for Christ's return. Even though they slept the wise virgins were still ready for the bridegroom to come, that they slept was merely incidental to the bridegroom's tardiness or at most a reminder of the weakness and impatience of men.

"The word of the Lord Jesus is fulfilled: 'When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?'"¹⁸³ The word of Jesus Pionius spoke about here was a question Jesus himself asked after he told a parable about the importance of prayer. There was a judge who did not fear man or God and every day a widow would come and demand that he give her justice against her adversary. He refused at first but became so tired of her that he eventually gave in.¹⁸⁴ Then, concerning those who pray, Jesus said, "I tell you, [God] will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"¹⁸⁵ What exactly Pionius meant by his question is hard to determine. He was either implying that there were none there who had faith - including himself? Or that the Christians there had great faith. Based on what he said earlier and what he would say later in his speech it would seem to indicate that he meant the first option.

"I also hear that each one is betraying his [neighbor], that the word might be fulfilled,

¹⁸³ Musurillo, 152-153. "Επληρώθη τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ· ἽΑρα ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν εὐρήσει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;"

¹⁸⁴ Luke 18:1-7.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid 18:8.



St. Catherine's, Mt. Sinai. *Saint Peter*. C. 600. Painting.

brother will deliver brother up to death.”¹⁸⁶ Pionius was trying to imply here that they were experiencing the end of the world before Christ returns. He was referring to a passage from the gospel of Mark where Jesus was teaching his disciples Peter, James, John, and Andrew privately about the end times. The second to last sign he told them was that family members would begin giving up their kin to be put to death. Several of the signs that Jesus mentioned appear to point directly to what many of the martyrs experienced, e.g. verses 9, 11 and 13, but others were completely unrelated, e.g. 7, 8 and 10.¹⁸⁷

“Indeed, Satan has demanded to have us

that he might sift us like wheat.”¹⁸⁸ Here Pionius took something that happened between Jesus and his disciple Peter and applied it to the Christians in prison with him. Jesus said: “Simon

¹⁸⁶ Musurillo, 152-153. “Ακούω δὲ ὅτι καὶ εἰς ἕκαστος τὸν πλησίον παραδίδωσιν, ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ Παραδώσει ἀδελφὸς ἀδελφὸν εἰς θάνατον.”

¹⁸⁷ Mark 13:3-13.

¹⁸⁸ Musurillo, 152-153. “Ἄρα ἐξητήσατο ὁ Σατανᾶς ἡμᾶς τοῦ σινιάσαι ὡς τὸν σῖτον.”

(Peter's Hebrew name), Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."¹⁸⁹ Jesus was probably reminding Peter of Job in the Old Testament who was sorely troubled by the requests of Satan, but ultimately held firm to his faith and obedience to God, more on this in the next chapter.¹⁹⁰ Pionius was equating the temptation he and all the Christian's had, that is to sacrifice and then be set free, to Satan's sifting.

"The fiery winnowing-fork is in the hand of the Word of God for clearing of the threshing-floor."¹⁹¹ This is something which John the Baptist said when speaking about Jesus. Jesus would separate the believers from the unbelievers metaphorically with a winnowing-fork, the believers to be gathered into the barn, heaven, and the unbelievers to be burned in unquenchable fire, hell.¹⁹² Doubtlessly, Pionius meant to contrast this verse with the previous verse he mentioned. Satan wanted to sift the Christians, taking them from God, and Christ was separating the faithful from the unfaithful.

"It may be that the salt has lost its [savor] and, cast out, is trodden on by men."¹⁹³ After the sermon known as *The Beatitudes*,¹⁹⁴ Jesus spoke to his followers about who they were in respect to the world, that they were to bring the good news to everyone. "You are the salt of the

¹⁸⁹ Luke 22:31-32.

¹⁹⁰ Job 1:6-13; 42:1ff.

¹⁹¹ Musurillo, 152-153. "Πύρινον δὲ τὸ πύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ Λόγου τοῦ διακαθᾶραι τὴν ἄλωνα."

¹⁹² Matthew 3:12.

¹⁹³ Musurillo, 152-153. "Τάχα ἐμωράνθη τὸ ἅλας καὶ ἐβλήθη ἔξω καὶ καταπατεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων."

¹⁹⁴ Matthew 5:1-12.

earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."¹⁹⁵ Pionius was questioning if the Christians he saw had lost their usefulness to God, if they had been abandoned by God to the Romans.

“But let no one imagine, my little children, that the Lord has failed, but rather we ourselves. ‘Can my hand be shortened,’ he says, ‘that it cannot save, or my ear made dull that it cannot hear? But your sins have made a separation between you and my God.’”¹⁹⁶ This is a slightly inaccurate quote from Isaiah. The speaker was actually Isaiah himself speaking to the Jews and what he said actually ends thus: “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”¹⁹⁷

Pionius was condemning the weaker Christians who wailed at their captivity essentially calling on them to repent as Isaiah was telling the Jews to do. But Pionius has only condemned those Christians so far, he has yet to justify implying that their cries and attitude were a sin. The Jews Isaiah was speaking to had completely abandoned God and had stained their hands with blood and fouled their mouths with lies.¹⁹⁸ These Christians have done nothing like what the Jews did.

“For we have sinned and some of us have indeed been scornful; we have done wrong by backbiting and by accusing one another; thus we have been destroyed by one another. Rather

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 5:13.

¹⁹⁶ Musurillo, 152-153. “Ἀλλὰ μή τις ἰπολάβῃ, τέκνιά, ὅτι ἡδυνάτησεν ὁ Κύριος ἀλλ’ ἡμεῖς. Μὴ ἀδυνατεῖ γάρ, φησὶν, ἡ χεὶρ μου τοῦ ἐξελέσθαι; ἢ ἐβάρθνε τὸ οὖς μου <τοῦ> μὴ εἰσακοῦσαι; ἀλλὰ τὰ ἀμαρτήματα ὑμῶν διῴστῶσιν ἀνὰ μέσον ἐμοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ ὑμῶν.”

¹⁹⁷ Isaiah 59:2.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 59:3-4.

should our [righteousness] exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.”¹⁹⁹ This is about all that we are given as justification for Pionius’ words against those Christians, that they have been accusing each other, but this is not corroborated anywhere else in the text. Pionius’ closing remark about the scribes and Pharisees came from Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus was teaching that he came to fulfill Moses’ laws from Deuteronomy.²⁰⁰ Jesus finished by saying almost sarcastically: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”²⁰¹ Why sarcastically? The Pharisees were known for adding their own requirements and good deeds to Moses’ laws, which were already very strict. Take for instance the story in John chapter 5 where Jesus healed a crippled man on the Sabbath, the Lord’s day, and incurred the wrath of the Pharisees for supposedly having worked on the Sabbath.²⁰² In Deuteronomy, God commanded that the Sabbath be kept holy and that no menial labor be done on the day set aside for the Lord; there was no mention of healing the infirm, caring for the poor, or anything else beneficial to others as opposed to one’s self.²⁰³ Consider also the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark. The Pharisees were again questioning Jesus when they saw that Jesus’ disciples were eating without cleaned hands. The passages says that it was the custom of the elders to wash before meals. The Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples did not follow the custom of the elders, but Jesus responded by calling

¹⁹⁹ Musurillo, 152-153. “Ἡδικήσαμεν γάρ, ἔνιοι δὲ καὶ καταφρονήσαντες· ἡνομήσαμεν ἀλλήλους δάκνοντες καὶ ἀλλήλους κατατιώμενοι· ὑπὸ ἀλλήλων ἀνηλώθημεν. Ἔδει δὲ ἡμῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην (Musurillo translated ‘justice’ here) περισσεύειν μᾶλλον πλεον τῶν γραμμαρέων καὶ Φαρισαίων.”

²⁰⁰ Matthew 5:17.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 5:20.

²⁰² John 5:1-17.

²⁰³ Deuteronomy 5:12-14.

the Pharisees hypocrites and quoting from Isaiah he said: “ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You have the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”²⁰⁴ Essentially to be better than the Pharisees was to be perfect because the Pharisees claimed to be righteous, as will be seen in the next chapter. They also claimed to obey Moses and all the extra laws they and their elders had added, an impossible task. What Jesus said sarcastically, Pionius took seriously.

The Contrasts

We have seen thus far in this chapter that there are very many examples where the martyrs or the narrators of the martyrdoms were wresting Bible verses from their original historical and literary contexts and misapplying them to their own present circumstances or in confusing answers to their questioners. However, this in no way means that this practice prevailed in every martyr Act, as we will now see from a consideration of the following case studies.

Before his trial, the unbelieving disciples of the deacon Flavian, who was arrested with Montanus and Lucius,²⁰⁵ begged him to sacrifice to avoid death and instead live free, because the sacrifice did not truly mean anything, but Flavian refused. Instead he admonished them

²⁰⁴ Mark 7:6-8. The passage quoted by Jesus here is from Isaiah 29:13, I will include both verse 13 and 14 to finish the incomplete thought from verse 13. “And the Lord said: ‘Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.’”

²⁰⁵ On these martyrs, see pp. 9.

reminding them of what he believed and taught.²⁰⁶

“ ‘In the first place,’ he said, ‘so far as one’s freedom of the spirit is concerned, it is better to die than to worship stones. Secondly, there is a supreme God... he alone is to be adored... We live even though we die; we conquer death and are not conquered by it; and you too should also become Christians if you would come to a knowledge of the truth.’ ”²⁰⁷

Flavian reminded his unbelieving disciples about the promise that Christians would be raised even though they were killed, a promise Paul expounded on in I Corinthians 15; thus they did not need to worry about his death. He then spoke to them of God’s wish from Paul’s first letter to Timothy: “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”²⁰⁸ Flavian, as his final teaching to them, the fulfillment of all he had probably taught them before, told them what they should do, turn to Christ and likewise be truly free from death.

After he gave one of his long speeches and after twice pointing to the book of Daniel and refusing to adore the golden idol, Pionius was brought out in front of a temple and a large crowd, many of whom knew and cared for him. They begged that he choose life because he was righteous and that it was good to live and see the light of day, but he denied their request.²⁰⁹

“I too agree that life is good, but the life that we long for is better; and so too of

²⁰⁶ Musurillo, 233.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 232-234. “*Multo melius esse primo in loco, quantum ad libertatem integritatis pertineret, occidi quam lapides adorare; tunc deinde esse summum Deum... ac propterea solus colendus sit... vivere nos etiam cum occidimur; nec vinci morte sed vincere; et ipsos quoque, si vellent pervenire ad notitiam veritatis, etiam Christianos esse debere.*”

²⁰⁸ I Timothy 2:4.

²⁰⁹ Musurillo, 143.

light, that one true light. All these things are indeed good, and we do not run from them as though we are eager to die or because we hate God's works. Rather, we despise these things which ensnare us because of the superiority of those other great goods."²¹⁰

In the third chapter of the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar built an immense golden image to which everyone who was part of the imperial administration was supposed to bow down and worship. However, three Jews refused to worship, they worked as administrators in the province of Babylon.²¹¹ This is likely the 'golden statue' to which Pionius was comparing the pagan idols. The book of Daniel was a favorite book of the martyrs so it is unsurprising that Pionius would make this reference twice in his speech when he could simply have said he refused to worship idols. In addition to the book of Daniel Pionius quoted from the Gospel of John when he spoke of the true light. The quote came from the opening chapter of the Gospel of John where John, using various analogies, was speaking of Jesus' arrival. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."²¹² While the pagans desired that Pionius live to see the light of day he desired to die so that he would see the light of Christ.

And last, just as Pamphilus²¹³ (or Papyrus as he is called in Greek) was about to be burned at the stake the, soon-to-be, martyr spoke to the crowd and the Christians among them. He was

²¹⁰ Ibid, 142-143. "Κάγω λέγω ὅτι καλόν ἐστι τὸ ζῆν, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο κρεῖσσον ὃ ἡμεῖς ἐπιποθοῦμεν· καὶ τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἐνεῖνο τὸ ἀληθινόν. Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἅπαντα καλά· καὶ οὐχ ὡς θανατιῶντες ἢ μισοῦντες τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Θεοῦ φεύγομεν, ἀλλ' ἐτέρων μεγάλων ὑπερβολῇ τούτων καταφρονοῦμεν ἐνεδρευόντων ἡμᾶς."

²¹¹ Daniel 3:1-12.

²¹² John 1:9.

²¹³ On this martyr, see pp. 10.

reassuring himself and the others that it was better to follow God than to suffer his wrath in hell for, he said, “Here the fire burns but a short time; there it is eternal and cannot be quenched.”²¹⁴ At his death Pamphilus was paraphrasing Luke 3:16-17, where John the Baptist preached about Jesus saying:

“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”²¹⁵

These two verses show God separating his people, the wheat, from the unrighteous people, the chaff. The fire of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire probably does not refer to the fires of hell but of the refining fires of a furnace that the righteous will go through at life’s end. However, in contrast to the baptismal fire, there is the unquenchable fire into which the chaff is going to be thrown namely the fires of hell. Pamphilus, then, was comparing his sufferings with the baptism John the Baptist promised to all who would follow Jesus and the end of a pagan life with the ultimate enduring fire of hell. Pamphilus was being executed by fire but he would die in only a short time while the pagans would burn in fire forever unless they repented. The pagans would have him be destroyed violently with the fire, but their efforts would only improve him and his friend, Carpus, an irony that only he and the intended readers of this Act would understand.

²¹⁴ Musurillo, 32-33. “*Hic enim ignis ad modicum uret; ille uero inextinguibilis et perpetuus est.*”

²¹⁵ Luke 3: 16-17.

Conclusion

Through all their trials the martyrs fought hard to stay faithful to God by keeping themselves pure from pagan sacrifices, worshipping the emperors, or surrendering the Christian scriptures. They, and the authors who wrote about them, often called upon God's word to support their actions and assertions and to bolster themselves and their fellow martyrs. There was one common but unplanned casualty though, the Bible. For all their zeal they all too often, whether or not they did so intentionally, undid scripture to support their own needs. Sometimes when they tried to use scripture to support their cause they instead weakened it, such as Justin's use of scripture at the beginning of this chapter. At other times they only made their own situations worse, unnecessarily antagonizing the people about them and the judges who ruled over them. Sometimes they would mix proper usage with improper, such as Pionius in his long speech to his fellow prisoners. Some would make bold claims about God to their accusers, when other more considered words would have told the pagan's the heart of the matter. Certain of them simply used the Bible to belittle the pagans and make themselves appear greater and more godlike. And sometimes they were using the Bible merely to add some authority to their own words without actually considering the meaning of the things they were saying. But then there were also those moments when the martyrs and the Bible worked in harmony. It is clear that the martyrs and the authors who wrote about them were well read, but by their words and actions they proved that it was not simply enough to know the words and to die for the words, rather it was far more important to understand the intent of the words and thus avoid error.

CHAPTER 3

CONCERNING THE DEVIL



Gustave Doré. *Satan*. 1890. Woodcutting. Satan in Dante's hell.

In this chapter, we will examine how the Devil is characterized within the various Acts and consider how this characterization differs among the catholic and Donatist martyr acts. Our point of reference for this comparison will be the biblical text itself. First we will examine the character traits of the Devil as these are revealed in the Old and New Testaments, as a prelude to our study of how he is characterized in the early Christian martyr Acts and the Donatist Acts. For

the purposes of this chapter, as was said above in the Introduction, we will consider the Devil to be a self-willed entity rather than a literary personification for the concept of evil.²¹⁶

The Devil as Portrayed in the Old Testament

In this section of the chapter we will be looking at how Satan, (or, the Devil) is portrayed in the Bible. First, we will look at him in the Old Testament then the New Testament. Both the first passage we will be looking at and the first time the character of Satan appears in the Bible is in the book of Genesis at the fall of mankind from God's grace.

Only a little time before Satan appears in the guise of a serpent in the book of Genesis, God created Adam, the first man. God gave Adam charge of all his garden and told Adam that he was permitted to eat of all of the fruit therein except the fruit which grew on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day he ate of that fruit he would die.²¹⁷ God then completed his creation of the world, the heavens, and all the creatures that dwelt on earth by creating the first woman to be Adam's helper.²¹⁸ All the world at that time was in good order and pleasing to God, then the Devil appeared.

²¹⁶ For a different perspective and an in depth study of the concept of the Devil please refer to the books, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (1977), and *Satan: the Early Christian Tradition* (1981), by Jeffrey Burton Russell. However, it should be noted that, at least from my reading and understanding of both the Bible and Prof. Russell's work, that he has a tendency at some times to inaccurately read elements from other ancient religions into some of the Bible's stories when the context of the biblical passages and or the nature of the then present society and hierarchy of the Israelite people do not allow for such elements.

²¹⁷ Genesis, 2:15-17.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 2:18-23.



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "Die Bibel in Bildern." 1860. Woodcutting. God questioning Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' ' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when

you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ ”²¹⁹

Now the woman believed what he said and went and ate the fruit and then offered it to her husband, Adam, and he also ate and they both realized they were naked and hid themselves because of their shame. When God found out he questioned them and then cursed each in turn, Adam, the woman, and the serpent. But God also provided a way for both Adam and his wife to be freed from their disobedience and promised that one day the serpent would be defeated.²²⁰

Where Satan first reveals himself he is shown as a liar intent on destroying and disrupting God’s creation by causing God’s greatest creation, man, to die. Interspersing his questions with the truth he fools the woman into disobeying God and bringing the curse of death upon herself and her husband after he too had eaten. Here the Devil is the great deceiving liar and a murderer, who stole man’s innocence and is intent on killing those whom God loves.

The next aspect of the Devil’s character comes from the opening to the book of Job. Job was a man who was blameless and upright, he feared God and kept himself from evil. He had many children and much property, he was the most blessed and wealthy man in the land.²²¹ Then the Devil came before God to tempt and to accuse Job.

“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them... And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a

²¹⁹ Ibid, 3:1-5.

²²⁰ Ibid, 3:6-23.

²²¹ Job 1:1-3.



Gustave Doré. 1866. Woodcutting. Satan descending from heaven to tempt man.

blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands... But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.’ And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him

do not stretch out your hand.’ ”²²²

Here in the book of Job we see two more things about the Devil that are of interest. First, that he is answerable to God and requires God’s permission to tempt Job and harm his possessions. Second, that he has the power to disrupt the lives of men by causing misfortunes to befall them, as happened to Job only a little later when all he owned and all his children were lost in a series of simultaneous cataclysms, and thus to tempt them to curse God.²²³ We can see that the Devil is the great destroyer, intent on separating man from God through pain and loss, but he is bound within the limitations set by God.

²²² Ibid, 1:7-12.

²²³ Ibid, 1:13-19.



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "Die Bibel in Bildern." 1860. Woodcutting. David being made king of Israel.

After God chose a people to be his own and gave them the land of Israel to dwell in, God also raises to rule over his people a king named David, of whom it was said, he was "a man after [God's] own heart."²²⁴ But, the Devil was opposed to Israel and sought to destroy them. He tempted David to number all the Israelites and David succumbed to him and told his commander, Joab, to make a census. However, Joab knew the will of God on this matter and said to David,

²²⁴ 1 Samuel 13:14. I only quote the middle of the verse but the whole is as follows: "But (speaking to the former king, Saul) now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

“May the Lord add to his people a hundred times as many as they are! Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord’s servants... Why should it be a cause of guilt for Israel?” But David insisted and Joab went out and did the king’s will.²²⁵ But God became displeased with what David had done and confronted David. When David repented for his error and accepted the responsibility for the deed God gave the king the choice of the punishment to the nation and David submitted himself and all of Israel to God’s hand because he knew his God was merciful.²²⁶ We see here that the Devil is the tempter, bringing men to anger God and to enter into disobedience. Though it was the Devil’s desire that the nation of Israel and David her king fall out of God’s grace and be destroyed, David’s humble repentance and trust in God saved Israel from God’s wrath.

Several hundred years after the reign of David a prophet named Zechariah had a vision of the Lord, Satan and the high priest in Jerusalem who was dressed in filthy rags. Zechariah recounts, “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!’ ” Then the Lord God forgave Joshua for his sins and the angel of the Lord commanded that Joshua be dressed in clean robes.²²⁷ Just as in the previous account of King David, Satan is less of a presence than at the fall of man and the trials of Job, but he is none-the-less very important to the scene as again we are shown an aspect of his character, the last we will consider from the Old Testament. In the vision

²²⁵ I Chronicles 21:1-4.

²²⁶ Ibid, 21:7-13.

²²⁷ Zechariah 3:1-5.

of Zechariah, Satan, as his name implies, is the accuser,²²⁸ accusing the sins of men before God so that men will fall out of God's favor and be condemned by his wrath. But, because God is merciful he will forgive and wash men clean of their sins and further he will rebuke Satan and God will protect his servants from him.

The Devil as Portrayed in the New Testament

In the last four case studies, we saw that Satan, the Devil, is the deceiving liar who led mankind out from the grace of God; the murderer who leads Adam to give up his life of bliss with God; the tempter who seeks to lead men to anger God so that they will be destroyed; and the accuser who wishes to keep men in their filthy state far away from the grace of God. Next we will look at how the Devil is portrayed in the New Testament.

There was a day when Jesus was speaking with the Pharisees. The Pharisees claimed to be children, descendants, of Abraham but Jesus denied what they said. Jesus claimed that if they were truly Abraham's children then they would do good as Abraham did and not be planning on having Jesus killed, instead they were doing the works of their father. The Pharisees replied that they had one father, God.²²⁹ Jesus said to them:

“If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God... Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the Devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth, because

²²⁸ Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, 189. The name Satan means 'accuser.'

²²⁹ John 8:39-41.

there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.’²³⁰

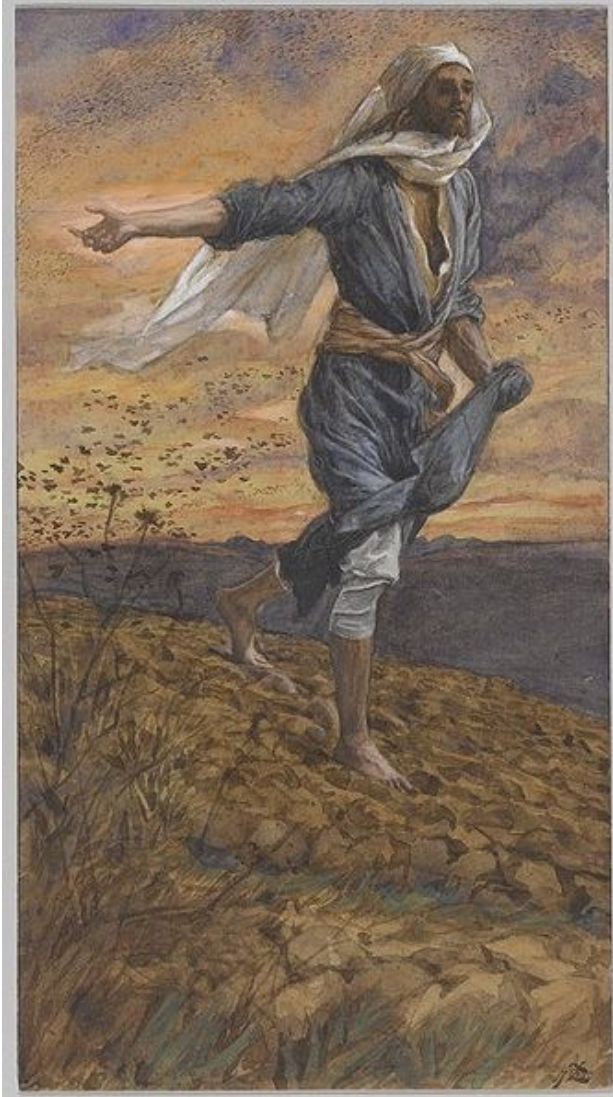
Just as in the book of Genesis, Satan is a murderer and a liar. But more than that we find that men can be his proverbial children. Men, like the Pharisees, who live out lies and contemplate murder, thoughts and deeds of the Devil, are children of the Devil in their souls.

In the fourth chapter of the book of Matthew, Jesus and the Devil confront each other. Jesus was out in the desert alone for forty days fasting and praying when the Devil came to him and tempted him. The Devil offered him food questioning whether or not he was truly God’s son, but Jesus countered this saying that he lived by the words that came from God’s mouth not only by bread. The Devil then took him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem and told him to leap off and be saved by the angels of God before the eyes of all of Israel, but Jesus reprimanded Satan warning him that he should not tempt God. Finally, the Devil took Jesus to a high mountain and promised to give him all the world if only Jesus would bow down and worship him, but Jesus said, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve.’”²³¹ Just as in the Old Testament, Satan is still a tempter seeking to weaken and draw his victims away from God. But in this passage, we are given another important piece of information about him, he wants to replace God as the one being worshiped. Satan is envious of God.

At another time during Jesus’ preaching in Israel, he tells a story about a man who went out and sowed seeds. Some seed fell along the path and birds came and ate it, some amongst the

²³⁰ Ibid, 8:42-44.

²³¹ Matthew 4:1-10.



James Tissot. Brooklyn Museum. *Le semailleur*. C. 1886-1894. Painting. The sower from Jesus' parable.

rocks and it was scorched by the sun, some among the thorns and it was choked by the weeds, and some fell into good soil and it yielded very much fruit.²³² Each location where the seed fell represented a situation where God's saving word was heard, all but the last location with the good soil results in a situation where the hearers turn away from God. Jesus said that the first situation, where the birds came and ate the seed, was when men heard the word but at once the Devil came and stole it from them and they remained lost.²³³ According to Jesus, then the Devil is also the deceiver, a thief stealing the

hope for salvation from man. In essence, Satan does this by distracting men and drawing the attention of their ears with so much chatter like that of birds, thus keeping them away from God and his word.

²³² Mark 4:3-8.

²³³ Ibid, 4:14-15.

In his first Epistle, Peter warns his readers to humble themselves and in every way to keep their minds and bodies strong and alert because of the danger they were always in.²³⁴ Peter says, “Your adversary the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of sufferings are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”²³⁵ In the book of Job, Satan had come to the assembly before God after doing just what Peter said, searching for victims to devour.²³⁶ The Devil, just as in the book of Job, is the destroyer, and just as in the vision of Zechariah he is the accuser, but he cannot stand before those who trust in God because he has no ability then to accuse them and thus separate them from God.

The Devil is an important character both in the Old and the New Testament. Whenever he shows himself, or is working covertly out of human sight, he consistently displays his character. Though he is not the first one to draw human blood²³⁷ he is a murderer from his origin. He is the first liar, deceiver, and thief, responsible for leading the first woman into disobedience. He is the tempter of mankind and God, bringing devastation to Israel. And he is a hunter seeking whom he may accuse and devour. But he is also limited in his action without the permission of God or the avenue of a heart in disobedience. Satan, the Devil, is a deceiver, a murderer, a thief, the tempter of men, an accuser and envious of God.

²³⁴ I Peter 5:6-7.

²³⁵ Ibid, 5:8-9.

²³⁶ Job 1:7.

²³⁷ In Genesis 4, Adam and Eve's first son, Cain, committed the first physical murder by taking his brother's life. Cain may have committed the first murder, but the first act of murder should be attributed to Satan because it was he who brought the possibility for death into the world and indeed the curse of death on man when he led Adam to sin.

The Devil as Portrayed in the Martyr Acts

Now that we have looked at the character of Satan as he is portrayed in the Bible we may examine how the authors of the early Christian martyr Acts portray him and how these portrayals are similar to or different from the biblical accounts.

During his questioning, the martyr Carpus²³⁸ reprimanded his questioner, the proconsul, warning him of the Devil. Carpus told the proconsul that the Devil, after he had fallen from heaven, brought war against the love God had for mankind. He prepared many plans against the Christians and, being older than time and permitted by God to do so, he could see what evils he would commit and in what ways he would tempt men. It was the Devil who was leading men like the proconsul into folly by worshiping things that were not truly gods.²³⁹ Very shortly after Carpus' warning to the proconsul, he, Carpus, and his fellow prisoner Pamphilus were taken out to be burned and, in the words of the author, "Then in the presence of the crowd the Devil's henchmen first stripped [Carpus and] Pamphilus and nailed [them] to the stake."²⁴⁰

Carpus describes the Devil as a highly intelligent destroyer and deceiver, which corresponds well with how he is portrayed in both the New and Old Testaments. The Devil is at war against God and his relationship with man ever working to disrupt and destroy especially by diverting the adoration of men away from God to the lifeless pagan idols. And as an example of the Devil's destructive ability, the author portrays the men working for the proconsul as henchmen of the Devil, doing the work of the Devil by having one of God's people killed. This

²³⁸ On this martyr, see pp. 10.

²³⁹ Musurillo, 25.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 32-33. "*Turba vero asante ministri Diaboli expoliantes primo Pamphilum ligno crucifixerunt.*"

was very similar to the way the Pharisees were portrayed by Jesus, the Pharisees one day would be responsible for Jesus' crucifixion fulfilling the Devil's plan to kill Jesus.

In the Act of the *Martyrs in Lyons*,²⁴¹ the author begins their story by explaining the circumstances under which the martyrs were arrested. He attributes the anger and the action of the people of Gaul to Satan, called the Adversary and the Evil One in his writing. Satan was training and preparing the people of Gaul to persecute the Christians as he swept in like a storm.²⁴²

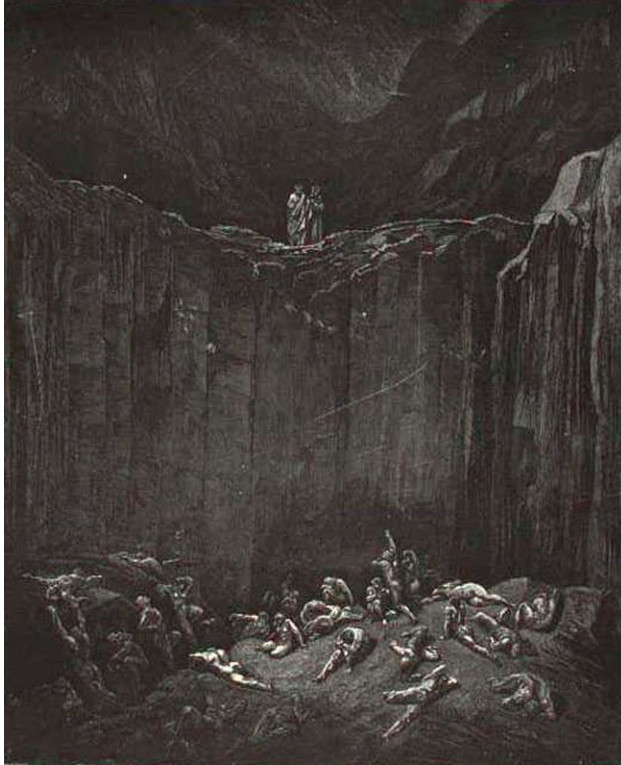
In this Act, the Devil is also working through surrogates, such as the proconsul or the soldiers, to wage war against God. The difference here with the martyrs of Lyons, though, is that he is teaching the people to be his imitators. In the other Act, he was deceptive and destructive, but in this Act he is not only removing God's witnesses, the Christians, but also training the populace to be more resistant to God, steeling their hearts against God.

After many of the Christians of Lyons were arrested, some of them denied Christ to escape torture. One of these was a woman named Biblis. However, the author of the Act records how she returned to her old faith against the expectation of Satan.

“The Devil thought he had already devoured her; hoping further to convict her as a slanderer, he brought her to the rack and tried to force her to say impious things about us, thinking she was a coward and easily broken. But once on the rack she came to her senses and awoke as it were from a deep sleep, reminded by that

²⁴¹ On these martyrs, see pp. 9.

²⁴² Musurillo, 63.



Gustave Doré. *Dante and Virgil above the bolgia of the falsifiers*. 1890. Woodcutting. Dante stands above the pit where the liars, Satan's spiritual children, are punished.

temporal torment of the eternal punishment in [hell].”²⁴³

Typical of a liar the promise that was made is not true. In this passage, we again see Satan, as a deceiver who promises any who will deny their faith release and escape from torture but not keeping his promise and instead leaving them in a worse position than before. Now they will be tortured under his accusation and are traitors to their faith. Such

Christians were called, as you may recall from the beginning of Chapter One,

‘*traditores*.’²⁴⁴ There is also a further development within this Act where the author of the act ascribes all the action in the scene to Satan personally. In reality, the questioning with torture would have been conducted by a man, but having Satan pictured personally made Biblis’ return to faith more potent. In all of the examples, we have seen from the Bible the only one where he was physically and visibly present, other than his temptation of Jesus, was when he was tempting Adam and his wife, and even then he was disguised.

²⁴³ Ibid, 68-71. “Ἡ δὲ δοκῶν ὁ Διάβολος καταπεπωκέναι, θελήσας δὲ καὶ διὰ βλασφημίας κατακρίναι, ἦγεν ἐπὶ κόλασιν ἀναγκάζων εἰπεῖν τὰ ἄθεα περὶ ἡμῶν ὡς εὐθραυστον ἦδη καὶ ἄνανδρον. Ἡ δὲ ἐν τῇ στρεβλώσει ἀνένηψε καὶ ὡσάν εἰπεῖν ἐκ βαθέος ὕπνου ἀνεγρηγόρησεν, ὑπομνησθεῖσα διὰ τῆς προσκαίπου τιμωπίας τὴν αἰώνιον ἐν γεέννῃ.”

²⁴⁴ Tilley, viii-ix. On this term, see pp. 11.

In the *Act of Marian and James*²⁴⁵ when the martyrs were being tortured, the author of the Act comments on the soldiers and magistrates calling them murderers and “priests... of the Devil.”²⁴⁶ The author of this act draws his concept for these men from what Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 14. These men could be called priests of Satan because of how they, like the Pharisees, followed his ways and fought against the Christians. Just as Satan was a murderer so also were these men. Just as Satan hated the Christians and tried to destroy them so these men were doing likewise.

After the martyrs Montanus and Lucius²⁴⁷ were arrested, they were taken to the prison because the procurator was not at that moment able to see them. While there, the author says, “The Devil set his mind to other stratagems: his plan was to break us by hunger and thirst.”²⁴⁸ This should remind the reader of when Satan tempted Jesus out in the desert. Jesus was weak from hunger at the time and should have been more easy to tempt, so also Montanus and Lucius should have been. But in spite of this clever ploy attributed to Satan in both cases, he was unsuccessful.

When Julius the veteran²⁴⁹ was before his superior officer, he was offered bribes to renounce what he had said about sacrificing. It is important to remember at this time that the officer felt compassion for the life of Julius, who he no doubt saw as a good man because of his re-enlistment and service record. However, when Julius refused the bribes, Julius said, “This is

²⁴⁵ On these martyrs, see pp. 9.

²⁴⁶ Musurillo, 199-201. “*Hoc est Diaboli sacerdotibus.*”

²⁴⁷ On these martyrs, see pp. 9.

²⁴⁸ Musurillo, 218-219. “*Diabolus ad alteras se astutias vertit, fame nos et siti temptare molitus.*”

²⁴⁹ On this martyr, see pp. 8.

the money of Satan, and neither you nor your crafty talk can deprive me of the eternal light. I cannot deny God.”²⁵⁰ Here again we should be reminded of Jesus and the Devil in the desert, because there also the Devil was attempting to bribe Jesus, even promising him rule of the whole world, a promise Satan was actually in no position to give.²⁵¹ Yet there is something else we can see in this Act, and that is the Devil’s use of the officer. While Julius was being tempted with freedom and great wealth, the Devil was deceiving the officer, using his compassion to inflate the man’s own view of himself and thus push him gently farther away from God by leading him to believe Julius was no longer the man he used to be. Now Julius was just an old fool and not worth listening to.

In the Act of the martyr Dasius,²⁵² the author briefly speaks of some Christians who renounced their faith and instead clung to the Devil even dressing as him with the pagans during a feast supposedly in celebration of the god Saturn.²⁵³

“For on the first day of January, foolish men who call themselves Christians march in a great procession disguised, wearing the costume and appearance of the Devil. Having changed their features, clad in goatskins, they renounce the grace in which they were reborn and take hold of the evil in which they were born.

Though they agreed at the time of their baptism to renounce the Devil and all his

²⁵⁰ Musurillo, 262-163. “*Neque pecunia haec Satanae neque tua subdola haec persausio privare me potest a lumine aeterno. Deum enim negare non possum.*”

²⁵¹ Matthew 4:1-10.

²⁵² On this martyr, see pp. 7.

²⁵³ Musurillo, 274-276.



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. "Die Bibel in Bildern." 1860. Woodcutting. The Archangel Michael guarding against the Devil.

devices, they once again serve him by their wicked and shameful actions.”²⁵⁴

In this case where we see some of the Christians who gave in to the temptations of the Devil, and thereby became *traditores*, the author of the Act is showing us the power of Satan’s lies and his ability to steal the salvation from men, just like the birds in Jesus’ parable. These

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 274-275. “Ἐν γὰρ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν καλανδῶν Ἰανουαρίων μάταιοι ἄνθρωποι τῷ ἔθει τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἐξακολουθοῦντες Χριστιανοὶ ὀνομαζόμενοι μετὰ παμμεγέθους πομπῆς προέρχονται ἐναλλάττοντες τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν καὶ τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν μορφήν τοῦ Διαβόλου ἐνδύονται. Αἰγείοις δέρμασι περιβεβλημένοι, τὸ πρόσωπον ἐνηλλαγμένοι ἀποβάλλουσιν ἐν ᾧ ἀνεγεννήθησαν ἀγαθῷ καὶ διακατέχουσιν ἐν ᾧ ἐγεννήθησαν κακῷ. Ἀποτάσσαι ὁμολογήσαντες ἐν τῷ βαπτίσματι τῷ Διαβόλῳ καὶ ταῖς πομπαῖς αὐτοῦ πάλιν στρατεύονται αὐτῷ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηποῖς καὶ αἰσχροῖς.”

people were brought into the Church and even baptized, but their faith was not firm and thus Satan was able to sneak into their hearts and steal the seed that is the Gospel.

Our final example, from the early Christian martyrs concerns a young woman named Agape.²⁵⁵ She was arrested with the girl Irene. During Agape's questioning she told the prefect this: "It is not at all in Satan's power. He cannot move my reason; it is invincible."²⁵⁶ Agape was claiming that, because her faith was firm, the Devil had no ability or authority to change her mind. Just as the Devil was only able to harm Job so also here, through the prefect. He had been given permission by God to harm her but that was all. Her soul was beyond the Devil's reach. he could not steal it, nor destroy it, it was safe from his lies and his accusations.

The Devil as Portrayed in the Donatist Martyr Acts

In the previous section we saw how the Devil worked through men and that the pagans were his children because of their words and deeds. We also observed how he continued to be a destroyer and thief, though he was limited in what he could do by the silent command of God. We will now move on to consider how Satan is portrayed in the Donatist Acts.²⁵⁷

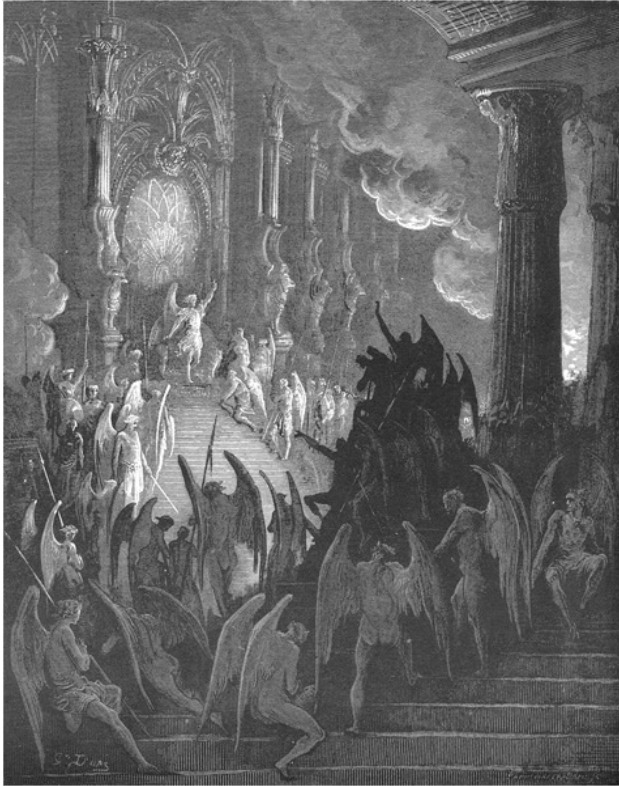
Our first example comes from a Donatist Act about a woman named Donatilla. She responds to her questioner at one point saying, "We have the food of the Most High (God); you, however, have the food of the Devil."²⁵⁸ What she means by "food of the Most High," is the

²⁵⁵ On this martyr, see pp. 7.

²⁵⁶ Musurillo, 286-287. "Οὐκ ἔνι καλῶς τῷ Σατανᾷ. Οὐκ ἄγει μου τὸν λογισμόν. Ἀνίκητος ὁ λογισμὸς ἡμῶν."

²⁵⁷ On these martyrs and the conflict between them and the catholic church, see pp. 11.

²⁵⁸ Tilley, 21.



Gustave Doré. 1866. Woodcutting. Satan rallying the fallen angels in Pandemonium, the royal city in hell, and plotting the downfall of God's greatest creation, man, as told in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Lord's Supper, the Communion bread and wine, and by the food of Satan she could mean either food sacrificed to idols or the Communion bread and wine of the catholic church. If you recall from Chapter One the Donatists believed that it was wrong to reinstate *traditores*²⁵⁹ to ecclesiastical positions and this is what led to their separation from the catholics. The belief of the Donatists, and their catholic counterparts, was that the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine during Communion was what made one Christian and brought Christians

both forgiveness of sins and closer to God, as will be seen later. But consuming the food of Satan, the opposite, would only increase sin and bring those who ate it closer to Satan.

In another Donatist Act, a group of martyrs, the Abatinian martyrs, are brought before a tribunal and the author portrays them as soldiers fighting in a battle and says, "This battle was to be fought not so much against human beings as against the Devil."²⁶⁰ Hiding behind the accusations and torture from the men persecuting them, the Devil was at work directing the

²⁵⁹ On this term, see pp. 11.

²⁶⁰ Tilley, 28.

actions of the judge and gaolers and plotting as he has so often been portrayed doing in other Acts and through the Pharisees to kill Jesus.

Later in the same Donatist Act, the author tells his readers of how when one of the martyrs prayed, while being tortured on the rack, the author says, “The Devil, through the judge, said, ‘You ought to obey the law of the emperors and the caesars.’”²⁶¹ Still later during the imprisonment and questioning of the Donatists in this Act, some others of them were brought before the judge, who was still possessed by the Devil. The judge brushed aside their claims of being Christians, as though it did not matter, and demanded a confession from them on whether or not they had been at an illegal gathering taking Communion. The author scoffed and wrote, “As if one could be a Christian without the Lord’s Supper or the Lord’s Supper could be celebrated without a Christian! Or do you not know, O Satan, that the Christian exists through the Lord’s Supper?”²⁶² Again, just as in other Acts mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Devil is not working out in the open where he might be seen but instead he hides and works through those he has deceived into being his servants for destruction. We can also see in the Story some evidence that the author blames the catholics for this persecution and is attempting to associate them with the Devil. The issue, according to the author, was not that the Donatists were Christians or that they were not sacrificing to the pagan gods but that they were having assemblies against the command of Emperor Diocletian. Emperor Diocletian had sided with the catholics and supported their choice for bishop of Carthage. At the time there was a law preventing Christians from forming certain assemblies, such as the one that led to the arrest of

²⁶¹ Ibid, 32.

²⁶² Ibid, 38.

the Abatinian martyrs. The bishop of Carthage attempted to prevent the Donatists from assembling and thus keep the ire of Rome at bay, but he was unable to stop them and they were arrested.²⁶³

Again, in the Story concerning the Abatinian martyrs the author confronts the argument between the Donatists and the catholics. He says, “The Devil by a craftiness of the most adroit fraud devises for himself a council of the [*traditores*] to deceive the innocent and to plunder the people... joining those [pagans] to himself with polluted traitors (catholics), he destroys them under the pretext of most holy religion.”²⁶⁴ Rather than the pagans being the only ones deceived here, it is the catholics who Satan convinced to work with the pagans to steal the faith of many and to kill those the Donatists believe are the only faithful Christian people. Satan, according to the author, is working as he did in Jesus parable, but through the use of former Christians and pagans, to steal the hope of salvation from men and instead replace it with one of his own deceptions.

Another Donatist Act written c. 317 mentioned several of the men involved in the persecutions of the Donatists. The author says, speaking of a recent martyrdom, “Caecilian, [the false bishop,] was there... and Leontius... Ursatius... Marcellinus [the] tribune, and the Devil appeared as counsellor for all of them.”²⁶⁵ The last three men mentioned were Roman officials in Africa, the first was the catholic bishop. Caecilian appears to have either been a former *traditor* or have been ordained by one. The Donatists, as shown here, believe that the Devil had

²⁶³ Ibid, 25-26.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 47-48.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 53.

essentially taken over the catholic church and that the catholics had therefore become like the Pharisees, children of the Devil.

The Donatists believe also that because Satan had taken over the catholic church he had corrupted the Lord's Supper held by the catholics. They blame Satan for the separation of the Church, and claim that the catholics are not, and cannot not be true Christians because they have fallen into a deception of Satan by permitting *traditores* into Communion and ordination.²⁶⁶ They now essentially consider *traditores* to be the worst of pagans. In the mindset of the Donatists, Satan has been very successful in destroying part of the Church by stealing her true faith in Christ through his deceptions.

Conclusion

The last example that we considered from the Acts of the early Christian martyrs, the simple words of Agape, showed us an aspect of the Devil's nature which none of the other Acts, either the Donatists' or the catholics', portrayed, that is, that he is answerable to God. The primary focus of both sets of Acts is that their enemies, whether pagan or catholic, are under the control of Satan. Even in the long speech by Pionius, toward the end of the previous chapter, Pionius placed the pagans as the henchmen of the Devil as he, the Devil, stood before God and demanded that he be permitted to winnow them just as he had done to Job.²⁶⁷ All of Satan's biblical characteristics found their way into the early Christian martyr Acts, and to a lesser extent the Donatist Acts, but with the greater focus being not on Satan but on the fallen men he

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 57.

²⁶⁷ Musurillo, 153.

controlled. For the early Christian martyr Acts, these men were the lost, who God was trying to save and who were buried in the sins which the martyrs in turn were denying. For the Donatist Acts, these men were those who called themselves Christians, but, because they had readmitted *traditores* or were former *traditores* themselves, they had fallen from the true Christian faith and were now fighting to destroy the real Church.

Unlike the Bible verses in Chapter Two, the authors and the martyrs here more properly understand and portray the Devil, even if they focus less on him than on how he is affecting the world of the martyrs. The authors and martyrs understand who and what Satan is. In the Bible, the effects of the Devil are generally more important than the figure of the Devil, just as in the Acts. Take for instance the book of Job where Satan only appeared in the first and second chapters, but the repercussions of his actions spanned the whole of the forty-two chapter book until God stepped in and restored Job. Or consider his first recorded act and the destruction that spawned from it leading ultimately to Jesus' death on the cross thousands of years later.

In the spiritual perspective of the martyrs and the authors who wrote about them it was clear that the enemy is Satan, he is the one that the martyrs are truly fighting against, just as he is truly the one that Jesus Christ came to earth to defeat in fulfillment of God's prophecy in the book of Genesis. through their understanding of this fact in their life, and ultimately its importance to their deaths, and through their general lack of understanding of the biblical verses they show how important it is to understand the intent and history of a text, not just to have read the text.

Examine the treatment of the Devil as an example of this. By their proper understanding of who Satan is and the attributes of his character they held their faith strong while on the rack.



William Blake. The Morgan Library. *When the Morning Stars Sang Together: "The Book of Job."* 1820. Painting. God questioning Job about all of creation.

In the Bible, the Devil is the liar who led all of mankind to sin through Adam; in the Acts, the Devil is the liar who kept the pagans in their sin and separated the Church. In the Bible, Satan is a murderer intent on killing the creation God loved the most; in the Acts, Satan is also the destroyer taking the lives of the martyrs through the hands of others. In the Bible, the Devil is the thief who stole the gospel from men; in the Acts, the Devil is the thief who stole the hope of salvation from the *traditores*. In the Bible, Satan is the tempter who convinced David to disobey God; in the Acts, Satan is the tempter who sought to

make the martyrs deny their faith. In the Bible,

the Devil is the accuser who sought to place men in God's wrath; in the Acts, the Devil is the accuser who is searching for any avenue by which to accuse the martyrs. And in the Bible, Satan is envious of the love that God had for man, and in the Acts, Satan fights against God making war on him and on his people because of that love.

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